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Rachael Thompson

The Natural World's Best Friend

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By Cynthia Robinson

Photography by Mike Force Photography

Growing up spending her summers at the Jersey Shore, Rachael Thompson developed an early love of the ocean. That love would ultimately lead her to the Golden Isles, where she is now the executive director of the Glynn Environmental Coalition (GEC), an organization that educates and advocates for a safe, clean environment and healthy economy for the people of Coastal Georgia.

“I grew up in South Brunswick, New Jersey, an hour from New York City, and only 45 minutes to the closest beach. My step-grandparents lived at the beach in Avalon, New Jersey, and we visited them every summer.” Rachael’s family had a small camper set up in a campground that shares a name with a Golden Isles landmark. “We stayed at Driftwood Campground,” she smiled. “So not only did I grow up in South Brunswick, I also spent summers at Driftwood—two parallels between my childhood and now.”

Her lifelong love of nature and the outdoors led her to pursue a degree in marine biology at the University of Rhode Island. After graduation, Rachael decided to migrate south for warmer weather. “I picked the first place to hire me—the 4-H Center on Jekyll Island. I started in August 2012 as a marine science instructor,” she said. From there she was program assistant at Tidelands Nature Center. For additional income, Rachael worked at Belk department store in Brunswick. A co-worker told her about Little St. Simons Island, where she then secured a naturalist position in 2014.

“I absolutely loved that job. I’m very outdoorsy and pretty content having nature interactions and sharing it with others.” Although she committed to working a full year on Little SSI, there was one drawback, “I was 24-years-old at the time and had very high social aspirations,” she laughed. “I was a social butterfly, so living on an

isolated island wasn't conducive to building a relationship."

After her Little SSI year was up, Rachael resigned and moved in with friends in Brunswick. "I ended up being in a relationship and almost moved to D.C. because it was where my boyfriend was going." However, the relationship ended, and after searching for a full-time job for so long, Rachael received two tempting offers, one— a seasonal job with the National Park Service as a fisheries biologist in the Shenandoah Mountains, however, the Satilla Riverkeeper was offering a full-time job in St. Marys (Georgia).

Rachael joined the Riverkeeper in 2016 as a watershed outreach development assistant. As in previous positions, educating the public was a big component of her job, but she also learned skills in seeking funding, as well as advocacy. "I got experience speaking at public meetings and helped Brantley County residents combat the landfill."

Always eager to do more and be of service, Rachael joined the board of directors at GEC in 2017. She applied for their project manager position in 2018, crediting the retiring David Parshley as her trainer and mentor. In early 2019 she asked the Board to promote her to executive director, which they did.

"Our work at GEC is all inter-connected, instead of in nice little boxes. There's a lot of overlap. But advocacy is in everything we do. We give people the tools they need and present them with options towards a healthy environment. One of our largest focuses is providing technical assistance in hazardous waste advocacy and letting the public know what's going on in that area."

GEC was launched in 1990 to address Coastal Georgia's "health-threatening pollution." There are 17 identified hazardous waste sites in Glynn County, including four Superfund Sites and four actively polluting industries," Rachael shared.

"We're here to answer questions and attend public hearings," said Rachael of herself and her small staff, which now includes a new Spanish outreach coordinator. "We have to be responsive to the public's needs." Being able to respond requires GEC staffers have a network of volunteers, as well as to work closely with other organizations such as Glynn Water Watch, River and Coastal keepers, and the 100 Miles group, all part in the shared goal of a healthy environment for Coastal Georgia families.

Two issues currently at the forefront are the continuing salvage cutting and cleanup of the Golden Ray sunken car-carrier, from the Saint Simons Sound, and the strong, mysterious odor many residents are reporting. GEC continues to monitor the ship cleanup and has launched an extensive effort to track the odor's source.



Their role with the Golden Ray and shared organizations is in communications, pressuring the United Command to keep the public informed. “While I wish the Golden Ray incident had never happened, it has brought awareness to our water quality and serves as a visual reminder of issues that have been here for years.”

Another main initiative is the Safe Seafood program. “A large misconception is we are telling people not to eat local seafood, but that’s not true. All our materials online and in print, inform people how to safely eat local seafood and which area waters to avoid eating seafood from. We want to make sure everyone’s health is protected.”

On days off Rachael spends time with her boyfriend and his two daughters, as well as time outdoors. “I could be a beach bum all day long!” She’s also a kayaker, gardener and recently got some roller skates she tools around on. You’ll find her backpacking, camping, and exploring Jekyll Island’s south end. Rachael is an avid cook and loves spending time coming up with new recipes that not only taste good but are healthy for the body and environment.

“I have a homemade enchilada sauce that is to die for. (See the recipe below) It’s easy to make and always is delicious. I’m also in the process of creating a BBQ sauce inspired by my father, who created some of my favorite foods.”

Her passion for healthy food and a healthy environment, are what keeps her going. “It can be tiring, but I love what I do. I think I’m where I’m meant to be.”

Up Close:

Backyard Paradise: “The house I have now in Brunswick has more plant life than any other yard on the street. My backyard is like my own little jungle.”

Culinary Bona fides: Growing up, she knew she either wanted to go into marine biology or culinary arts. “When I moved here, I worked as assistant prep chef at a former St. Simons restaurant. It was fun dabbling in that again, but learned I made the right choice went I went into marine biology!”

Survivor: “Not many people here know I was the daughter of an alcoholic and lost my dad when I was 10 years old. I’m also a survivor of sexual assault. I learned at a young age that life can be hard, but I overcame it.”

Giving Back: Rachael volunteered with the Girl Scouts 12 years and is Girl Scouts program trainer; involved with the Junior League of the Golden Isles, 4-H summer camps, Boys & Girls Clubs, Parks and Recreation, and on Board of Directors for Pull For A Kid, Inc. a local organization for at-risk youth.

Rachael’s Enchilada Sauce:

2 Tbsps Oil

2 Tbsps Flour

½ tsp Salt

4 Tbsps Chili powder

¼ tsp Cumin

Cayenne for spice, optional

¼ tsp Oregano

2 cups Vegetable or chicken broth

Make it with boiled chicken or with black beans that have been mashed and cooked with peppers, onions, and cayenne.

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