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Bank Manager

Robert Belanger developed a lifelong appreciation for the Red River as a child; he's spent decades working to keep it clean.



Robert Belanger (centre) is the founder and co-ordinator of Red River Operation Clean Up. He and his staff Brandon Strang (left) and Cody Pellaers clean up the banks along the Red River north of Lockport.

*By: Aaron Epp
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Photos By: John Woods / Winnipeg Free Press*

Robert Belanger fondly recalls the hot summer days he spent as a child at the Selkirk waterfront.

"I would walk down with my fishing rod and my chair, and spend time fishing with my friends or fishing by myself, just enjoying the river and the environment," the 59-year-old recalls. "I spent hundreds of hours enjoying the river."

By Grade 3, Belanger had a desire to become a conservation officer — a dream he realized in the late 1980s. But more than a decade into his career, he became dismayed by the amount of garbage he was seeing on the banks of the Red River.

"At the time, there was no program to pick up the garbage," he says. "It was so bad and it just frustrated me."

In 1999, Belanger established Red River Operation Clean Up. The grassroots initiative



aims to keep the river clean by picking up litter. The organization also promotes education, public outreach, citizen involvement and partnership development.

Working from Lockport to the mouth of Lake Winnipeg, Belanger estimates that in the last two decades, he and his employees have removed 500,000 kilograms of garbage.

“It’s a local environmental initiative that wants people to take pride in the Red,” explains Belanger, who retired from a 30-year career with Manitoba Conservation in 2017 and currently serves as a councillor in the RM of St. Clements.

“We want people to pick up after themselves. That’s what we want.”

The organization operates from May through October, starting the season by distributing 170-litre barrels along the riverbank for people to use as garbage cans. Two full-time employees spend the spring, summer and early fall gathering debris and litter, and they empty the barrels.

The bulk of the garbage comes from anglers, tourists and people looking to save themselves a trip to the dump. Over the years, Belanger has

collected couches, microwaves, fridges, stoves, mattresses, drywall and building materials.

“It would blow your mind,” he says. Operation Clean Up got its start with financial support from the rural municipalities of St. Clements and St. Andrews.

Today, Belanger relies on about a dozen private and public-sector groups for the \$45,000 needed each year to run the program. The majority of the money goes to wages for the two employees and buying fuel. Belanger volunteers his time.

Belanger’s dedication to the cause is admirable, says Steve Strang, managing director of the Red River Basin Commission, a not-for-profit that focuses on water management and water quality for the area and the entire Lake Winnipeg Basin.

Prior to joining the commission, Strang was mayor of the RM of St. Clements for 12 years. He got to know Belanger when he was first elected in 2002.

“For one person to step up and to take it upon himself to start a not-for profit organization to address those issues and to take care of our environment and make a better future for our kids, he needs to be commended,” Strang says.

“He’s not making money, and I’m just blown away that he continues to gift himself to this cause.”

One of the witnesses to the amount of garbage left on the riverbank is Strang’s son, Brandon, who has worked for Operation Clean Up for almost 10 years.

What started as a high school summer job has become an



In the last two decades Belanger estimates he and his crews have removed 500,000 kilograms of garbage along the banks of the Red River.



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