

# Peter Harnik: **RTC** **First Responder**

By Harry Jaffe

The phone in the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) office in Washington, D.C., rang for the first time on December 30, 1985. Peter Harnik, RTC co-founder, picked it up. "If we don't acquire this track in Dutchess County," said the desperate caller from New York City, "it will be sold and lost forever."

"Sorry," Harnik recalls ruefully replying, "there's not much we can do about it." Why? Because RTC would not officially open until February 1986. The organization's office was empty. No staff. No desks. No chairs. Just that phone.

When RTC did open for business, numerous frantic calls like the one from New York City came in daily. Rail lines across the country were in play. Would they fall into private hands? Continue as rail lines? Or become trails open to the public?

And RTC has been responding ever since, at the forefront of a movement that has helped create more than 1,400 rail-trails coast to coast.

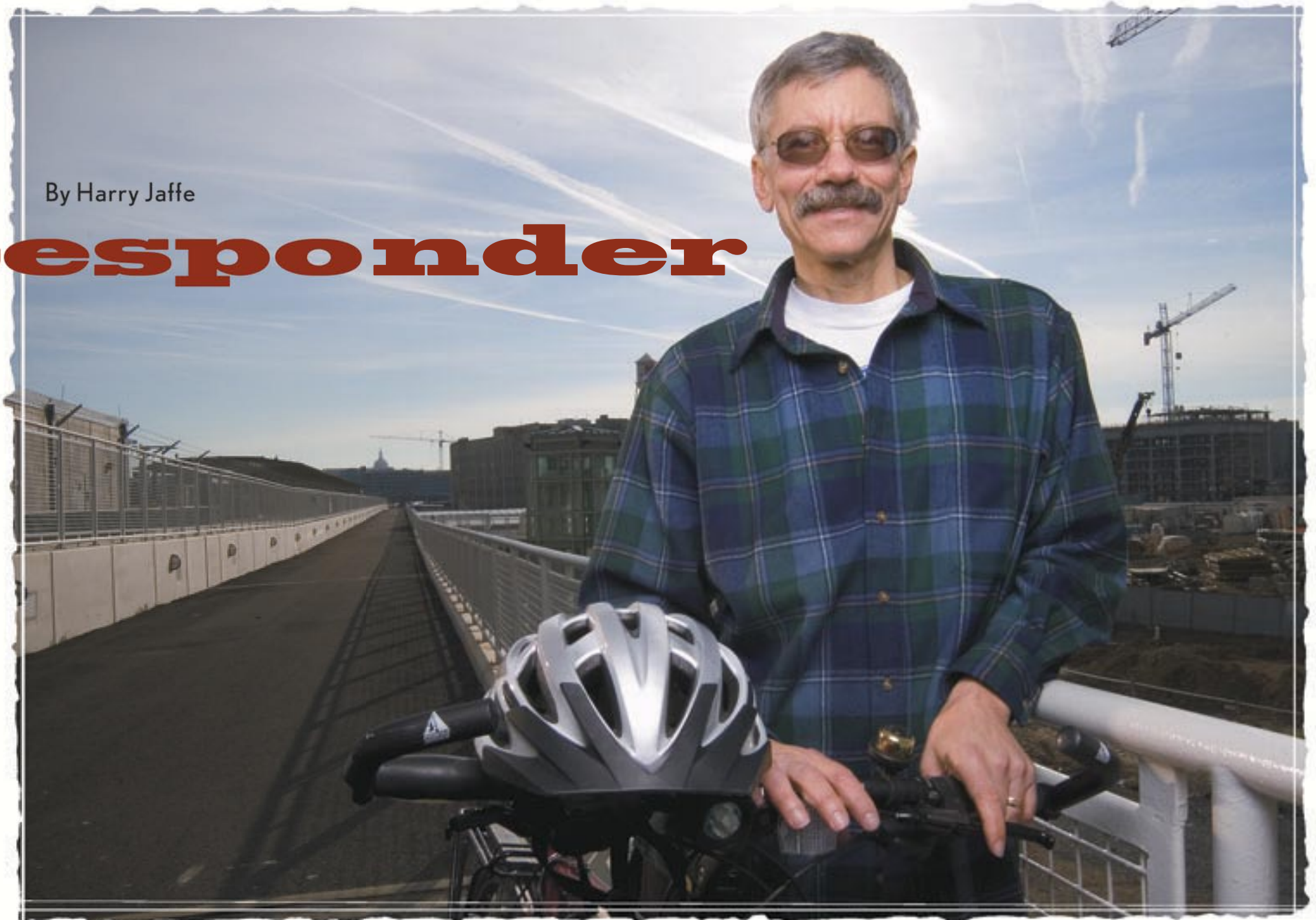
In the beginning, the RTC staff consisted of David Burwell and Harnik, a rangy, 36-year-old veteran of the 1970s environmental wars. Harnik, it seems, was made to lead a group such as RTC. When his parents and their families fled Austria before World War II, Harnik's aunt brought along her bicycle. Harnik would ride that bike from the family's home on Manhattan's upper west side to the foot of the island, where he and his buddies would catch the ferry to Staten Island so they could bike some more. "I could not believe my mother let me do it," says Harnik.

Those early biking tours informed his thinking with "New York urbanity" and a desire to find an auto-free zone for bicycles. After college he worked for a decade at Environmental Action, a lobbying group in Washington, D.C., all the while dreaming about bikes and cities and trails.

Ed Koch, then mayor of New York, had closed parts of Central Park to cars, and its lanes had filled with bikes and people. Harnik was intrigued. In 1978, he took his wife on a honeymoon to Holland. "I was blown away by their bicycling facilities," he says. In London he was inspired by an elderly woman he saw biking through downtown with a cane in her basket.

Back in the United States, Congress was beginning to devote attention and funds to trails. Activists started to see the potential in converting the nation's web of rail corridors into public trails. In 1983 Harnik started meeting monthly with activists who shared the dream of building a movement around rails and trails. (See "A Trip Down Memory Trail," page 16.) There was a lot of talk; a lot of creative ideas were exchanged. But "we would get all revved up," Harnik recalls, "then nothing would happen for 29 days." That's why, after a year, the group determined to launch a new organization dedicated to creating a trail network.

Seed money in hand, they established an office and put out the word that rail lines were being put in play. The calls started coming. RTC sent direct mail fundraising appeals, and the donations poured in. "We were like Paul Revere on the telephone," Harnik says, "calling everyone we knew to warn them about rail



corridors that were coming up for abandonment. No one had ever suggested the rail lines be retained as trails." Over the next decade, RTC helped inventory rail lines and assisted groups from coast to coast in building trails. "Rail-trails" became part of the American language and landscape.

In the mid-1990s, Peter Harnik joined the Trust for Public Lands, where he could devote his energy to developing city parks and urban bike

routes. Today his hair has turned salt and pepper, but his frame is still lean from biking seven miles to work every day, and the spark of trail advocacy still gleams in his eyes. "Trails through cities are becoming more significant in connecting to rail-trails," he says. "We need to continue to raise the public's awareness and perception of the tremendous value of urban trails—even if it costs millions of dollars to acquire them."

Harnik lists Indianapolis, Denver, Seattle, Portland, Ore., and Minneapolis as cities that have welcomed urban trails. Washington, D.C., and some other cities don't yet have their trail advocates aligned with public officials. "Everything you do in a city is more complicated," Harnik says.

Talk about complicated. That call to Harnik in 1985 about the Dutchess County rail line was the start of a 10-year crusade. The corridor was lost

and sold and brought back under public control. In 1996, it became the Harlem Valley Trail. Harnik has even toured the trail he said he couldn't help to build.

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