


FOR THE LOVE OF THE LAND

How This Attorney Found a Home in Sustainable Forestry



 Above: Mavis Gragg walks in the woods, followed by videographer Tres Bruce.
Left: Horton Grove Nature Preserve is Triangle Land Conservancy's largest public preserve, with approximately eight miles of hiking trails.



Check out the NCFCA's YouTube page to see Gragg interviewed as part of a video series on environmental sustainability.



By Mavis Gragg, CEO of HeirShares and outgoing director of the Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention Program

Several years ago, I decided to start a law firm where I focus on families like mine — land-rich, cash-poor. I'm from Black Mountain, NC and while my family did not have much, we had small pieces of land in one of the most beautiful parts of our state.

There was Great-Granny's little plot tucked away in a lush cove where she and Granddaddy Joe lived off the land entirely. There was Aunt Mae's few acres on the side of a mountain that she'd leveraged as her retirement plan. She slowly liquidated portions of the land until it was less than an acre, holding the house where she raised my father and nurtured her family for most of her 93 years. There was also our childhood home and Granny Frances's land — two places central to my childhood. Unfortunately, we lost most of it because my siblings and I inherited the land but were left with no plan. There was no strategy to carry this legacy forward. Of course, most of my clients have the same challenges. However, most of my clients had one thing my family did not have: trees!

Early into opening my law practice, I had a transformative conversation with Jennie Stephens, Executive Director of the Center for Heirs Property Preservation, who told me about the Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention Program (SFLR). In that conversation, I learned that people can own forests. Intrigued by this discovery, I headed to the forests. I joined a local land trust board and began presenting to landowners throughout eastern North Carolina. I also started hanging out with foresters, which I love.

Helping Clients Stabilize Ownership of Their Land

Soon, trees and other natural resources became part of the intake process with potential legal clients. Why? Because most people with real estate problems do not want to go to an attorney. In addition to the costs involved, their matters are often complex and overwhelming. When we get to talking about the land itself, the tone of the conversation is upbeat. You can sense pride and often nostalgia when landowners discuss their property. As they're sharing, I'm looking the property up in the local Geographic Information System (GIS) data to get a closer look at what's being described by the client — a skill we do not learn in law school. By talking to them about the natural characteristics of their land, I can

identify ways to incentivize them to address the legal challenges. It bolsters my pitch by telling them that if we can clear title and stabilize ownership of the property, they can improve their stewardship and enjoyment of this important asset.

Approaching my work with clients in this way improved my capabilities and enjoyment as an attorney. Attorneys and foresters are alike in that we help clients problem-solve and strategize, and we provide counsel. I believe foresters are much happier because they get to be outside and connect deeply with their clients on their land. I followed their lead and started going to the landowner when I can. I happily visit my clients at their homes across eastern North Carolina. Doing so reinforced my determination to help them achieve their goals. It also got me outside!

My love for forestry has taken my career in an unexpected direction. I eventually became Director of the SFLR program as an employee of the American Forest Foundation. This year, I will take my journey into natural resources to Harvard Graduate School of Design as a member of the Loeb Fellowship, where I will be able to fortify my practice and expand my vision in service of the natural environment. I never imagined I would be at this point in my legal career, where I get to advise landowner clients of how to keep their land in forests and get to spend time outside. I have forestry to thank for this and I'm forever grateful. ■



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mavis Gragg is a seasoned attorney and conservation professional with nearly two decades of experience in real estate, conflict resolution, estate planning, and probate. Mavis earned her Juris Doctor Law degree at Pepperdine Law and her Bachelor of Arts degree in Industrial Relations at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

NCFS Seedlings

TIMBER | WILDLIFE | WETLANDS



www.buynctrees.com

1-888-NCTREES

FOR YOUR

New Clearcut Forestry Solutions

Claridge Nursery

762 Claridge Nursery Road
Goldsboro, NC 27530
919.731.7988

Linville River Nursery

6321 Linville Falls Highway
Newland, NC 28657-9048
828.733.5236

CONIFERS | HARDWOODS | NATIVE | UNDERSTORY | FRASER FIR

MAINLINE NATURAL RESOURCES, PC

Forest Operations Contracting and Consulting

Contract Hand Falling
Forest Operations Specialists



North Carolina Registered Forester #1707

(540) 808-7832 | MainlineNR@outlook.com
mainlinenaturalresources.com