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The Mighty Mississippi: Rediscovering a River That's Always Changing



"You're five minutes away from this whole other world that most people in Memphis don't know exist."

Benny Lendermon boats, floats and promotes the Mississippi River. Most of the time, though, he navigates from behind a land-bound desk. As president of Riverfront Development Corporation, he oversees a range of projects, including the development of green space, walkways, trails and a connected park system.

"We're trying to get people down by the river where they can actually get close to the water level," he explains. "They can feel the power of the river ... they can picnic, they can walk along the edge. They can do things people haven't been quite able to do because we're perched up so high above the water."

Lendermon loves the oceanfront-like sunsets, and believes the best views of downtown Memphis are from the water. He views riverfront development as a catalyst for improving the economic health of the whole region. Unfortunately, the drastic fluctuations of the river can make projects costly and controversial. On those days when he feels like he's fighting an upstream battle, he turns to the river to unwind.

Growing up, Lendermon was a largemouth bass fisherman and also did some tournament fishing. Now he mostly casts his line in search of white bass and monster catfish. He catches thousands a year, but throws most of them back.

Most weekends find him tooling out of the harbor early in the mornings. "You've got the skyline of Memphis on one side, and the fog just hanging two feet off the water as the sun's burning it off, and you're sort of flying up the river at 50 to 60 miles an hour," he says. "It's almost like a religious experience."

The river also provides him with an unlikely social outlet. "I met some of my good friends out on the river," he says. "You go out there and you meet somebody — it's not like you're in a crowd. Nobody is within miles sometimes."

On dry land, Lendermon heads to the [FedExForum](#) to watch Memphis Grizzlies and University of Memphis Tigers basketball games. "You feel this huge amount of energy from the crowd," he says. "It makes you feel alive."

He is also rediscovering Summer Avenue — where he once cruised as a teenager — and likes visiting [Central BBQ](#) to enjoy true Memphis-style barbecue and watch a game. The best drive in the city, he believes, is on South Riverside Drive north of the interstate near Ashburn-Coppock Park. "It sort of frames the river and Tom Lee Park," he explains. "You get this great panoramic view of the river and Memphis downtown."

His efforts to redevelop the riverfront have brought significant changes. Thousands more people come to the river now to boat, float, bike and hike.

Lendermon continues to rediscover a river that is always changing. "You go two miles up the river at low water and it's all sand bars and natural areas and egrets and cranes and turtles and pelicans," he says. "It's just like the world was when Mark Twain was coming down. So you're five minutes away from this whole other world that most people in Memphis don't know exist."