

## Gritty eco-lawyer Amy Armstrong takes charge

GEORGETOWN —

Amy Armstrong sat in silent mourning as her friend and mentor, Jimmy Chandler, was eulogized last week at a church overflowing with the people who loved him and respected his work.

It had been an emotional week for Chandler's law partner and during the funeral Wednesday, it was easy to see the sorrow Armstrong felt at losing the well-known environmental attorney.



But Armstrong, whose life has followed a winding road of personal tragedy, also realized it is her job to carry on Chandler's work at the small but highly regarded legal service he founded in 1987.

Her supporters say no one is better suited to take over for Chandler than the gritty Armstrong, who overcame a life-changing injury to become one of South Carolina's top young environmental attorneys.

Armstrong, 39, is a former state wildlife biologist who went to law school after a 1996 car wreck left her paralyzed from the waist down.

She took on three internships while at USC's law school, graduated in 2002 — and was so impressive Chandler hired her as his co-counsel right away. They worked side by side until his death Aug 7.

Friends and colleagues say Armstrong's determination to overcome the injury is inspirational and remarkable.

"Her history is terrifically impressive," said Frances Close, who chairs the board of Chandler's S.C. Environmental Law Project. "The accident, and then going to law school, I admire her tremendously for that. She is as tough as she can be."

On Thursday, the law project board approved Armstrong to replace Chandler as president. Armstrong was Chandler's hand-picked successor for the job.

At its meeting Thursday, the law project board also hired a second attorney to help Armstrong. He is Columbia lawyer Michael Corley, a member of the law firm of former U.S. Attorney John Simmons. As with Armstrong, Chandler recommended hiring Corley.

Armstrong said she and Corley are up to the challenge, despite the sad circumstances of the past week.

"I was fortunate enough to have worked with Jimmy for eight years," she said. "So I'm very sensitive to how this organization moves forward. I want to make sure we continue."

The S.C. Environmental Law Project has been involved in virtually every major conservation case in South Carolina since the late 1980s and is well-known in legal circles from Atlanta to Washington.

The law project often has represented conservation groups and citizens for free or at a reduced cost. It is funded by donations, charitable foundations and Close, who provided the initial money to get the law project started 23 years ago.

## Woodpeckers to eco-law

When she graduated from Spring Valley High School in 1988, Armstrong didn't know what she wanted to study in college. Conservation issues certainly weren't at the forefront — but four years at the University of Michigan changed that.

A biology major, she began to think how interesting science and nature could be. Upon graduation in 1992, she moved back to Columbia and began looking for an outdoors-related job.

She didn't find anything right away, so she waited tables at a chain restaurant and worked at a USC laboratory. Armstrong found what she was looking for at the state Department of Natural Resources. A college professor she knew had suggested Armstrong volunteer with the DNR to learn the ropes of in-the-field wildlife work.

That experience, catching and banding rare birds, eventually prompted the DNR to offer her a full-time job.

Armstrong was thrilled. She would be paid to protect the red-cockaded woodpecker, a federally listed endangered species. Her work took her to forested coastal islands, vast interior woodlands and other places where the birds lived.

“We had complete confidence in her from the get-go,” said Tom Kohlsaas, former director of the DNR's Heritage Trust division. “She was very energetic and took a lot of pride. It was apparent to me she had a lot of smarts and was a quick learner.”

Sometimes, Armstrong would drill holes in pine trees to provide nesting cavities for the birds. Other times, she would climb a tree to see how many eggs had hatched or to put tags on baby birds. Or she would make sure vegetation didn't obscure the nesting cavities needed by the birds.

It was a great life, she recalls.

Everything changed on a summer day in 1996.

Rounding a curve as she drove through Sand Hills State Forest near Cheraw, she lost control of her truck. The vehicle flipped, and Armstrong was thrown from the front seat. She remembers excruciating pain. And she vaguely remembers someone in the hospital telling her she would never walk again. She questioned how she could live without the use of her legs.

“It was hard to imagine going from running around in the woods and being the outdoor person that I am, to not being able to do any of that,” she said. “It was hard for me to wrap my head around what had happened.”

Her rehabilitation was difficult.

Armstrong moved in with her parents, and spent the next year taking therapy, getting stronger and learning how to adapt to the change in her life.

Then her father suggested she go to law school.

She thought about it, and after a while, came to the realization it would allow her to continue her work on environmental issues.

“I thought .... ‘Maybe Dad is right,’” she said.

Armstrong not only went to law school but attended graduate school at the same time. While doing post-graduate work, she served as an editor for the S.C. Environmental Law Journal and president of the Environmental Law Society.

And each summer, she would do an internship. First it was with Chandler, then with the Southern Environmental Law Center, a regional legal service that challenges developers, government agencies and big businesses on conservation issues. In 2001, she interned with the U.S Department of Justice's environmental enforcement section.

Armstrong began working full-time with Chandler in 2002, after she won a two-year grant to pay her salary. The Environmental Law Project put her on the payroll in 2004.

Since joining the law project, Armstrong has been widely praised for her courtroom work.

She was the lead lawyer in a case before the S.C. Supreme Court that many say protected the state's freshwater wetlands from unchecked development. Developers seeking a permit to fill isolated wetlands near Murrells Inlet had challenged South Carolina's coastal management law, saying it was invalid.

Armstrong, with assistance from Chandler, told the Supreme Court the law had been properly developed. The high court agreed last February in a decision that resolved years of legal questions about freshwater wetlands laws in South Carolina.



### **What's next**

Today, Armstrong inherits plenty to test her legal and management skills.

Not only must she head up the law project's legal team, but she also must manage its \$400,000 annual budget and find ways to sustain the budget through fund-raising.

The law center had about 20 active legal cases at Chandler's death, including several that could determine whether some mega-landfills can be built under an old — and looser — set of state rules. Hanging in the balance are possible mega-dumps planned for Laurens, York and Marlboro counties.

Other pending cases include:

- A developer's plan to build apartments around one of Richland County's most visible lily ponds. The pond on Trenholm Road would be dredged and converted to a stormwater lake. The law project is challenging state permits in an attempt to keep that from happening.
- A developer's plan to build on a sand spit at Kiawah Island, a proposal with fierce opposition from conservationists. The law project has challenged the developers in court in what it says is an attempt to protect the beach.
- Whether the operator of a nuclear waste dump will have to improve disposal practices. Leaks from the dump, which buries waste in unlined trenches, have for years polluted groundwater in Barnwell County uphill from a small neighborhood. The law project has challenged a state permit in an attempt to stop the leaks.
- A developer's plan to build in a Conway nature preserve that had been set aside years ago for permanent protection. The case could set a precedent on whether areas designated for protection can later be developed.

In addition to those cases, Armstrong is awaiting the verdict on three state Supreme Court cases she and Chandler argued.

Daryl Hawkins, a law project board member for 20 years, said it's not possible to fill the void left by Chandler. Since he was involved in so many major S.C. environmental cases dating to the '80s, Chandler had an institutional memory of legal disputes that often proved to be an advantage in later court proceedings, Hawkins said.

Still, Hawkins said he's glad Armstrong will run the Environmental Law Project.

"Jimmy would be pleased we have somebody like this," Hawkins said. "She'll have to grow into the job, but she's ready to take it on."