PROTECTING the RIVER

UA students are a driving force behind efforts to improve conditions in the Black Warrior River and ensure clean drinking water for the many Alabamians dependent on the waterway and its tributaries.

BY KATIE SANDERS | PHOTOS BY SHANNON AU维尔, MICA AGUILAR AND ERYN TURNER

U niversity of Alabama stu-
dents are the primary man-
power source for a nonprofit organization working to pro-
tect the Black Warrior River watershed, which supplies drinking water in west and central Alabama and has appeared on a list of the United States’ 10 most endangered rivers by the conservation group American Rivers.

Black Warrior Riverkeeper strives to improve the condition of the waterway that runs through the heart of Alabama, including the cities of Birmingham and Tuscaloosa, and whose river basin is home to more than 1 million people. The clean-
water-advocacy organization relies heavily on volunteers, the majority of whom are UA students.

Since 2006, thousands of UA stu-
dents have volunteered with the non-
profit through service-learning courses, as members of student organizations or individually. In 2014, 524 volunteers dedicated 6,898 service hours to Black Warrior Riverkeeper projects, and the vast majority were UA students, says Charles Scribner, executive director of the nonprofit.

“UA students have been especially ac-
tive in litter removal along Tuscaloosa’s beautiful river walk, while also contribut-
ing to advocacy,” Scribner says.

More than 90 coal mines operate in the Black Warrior River watershed. A wa-
tershed is all the land area that drains into a particular body of water, such as a creek, river, lake or ocean. Surface mining and underground mining are popular meth-
ods for coal extraction in Alabama and can result in sediment and heavy metals polluting water channels.

Robert Thomas, a 2014 graduate who majored in human environmental scienc-
es, has performed research and monitored coal-mining activity as part of his work for Black Warrior Riverkeeper.

“I like that I am helping make a differ-
ce for our environment and the people inhabiting it,” Thomas says. “It is a won-
derful responsibility.”

Through multiple service-learning courses, UA students work to improve the health of the river ecosystem and raise awareness about the need to protect it.

After completing the UA Center for Ethics & Social Responsibility’s Faculty Fellows in Service Learning program in 2014, Caroline Parsons, an instructor in the communication studies department, says she was convinced students in her COM 122 Critical Decision Making class would be able to use their research, writ-
ing, deliberative and public speaking skills to bring attention to the Black Warrior River. The course explores basic principles of the decision-making process, providing a general introduction to persuasion, argu-
ment, group communication and group problem-solving skills.

Students volunteered with Black War-
rior Riverkeeper and held a community roundtable event in which they described problems facing the river and possible solu-
tions and moderated discussion. As part of their research, they visited the river, studied other states’ efforts to protect their rivers and spent hours writing about their findings.

“Over the course of the semester, I was researching the Black Warrior River for several hours a week,” says Lexi Later, a se-
ior majoring in communication studies. “Aside from that, I made a point to bring it up to friends and peers because I believe a huge part of the problem is a lack of public knowledge. Many people had no idea what problems we, as a community, were facing.

“My group members and I found out some very worrisome news and sta-
tistics about the river, including informa-
tion about an oil spill in January 2014 that released 750,000 gallons of crude oil into the river from a derailed train. It was shocking that something like this wasn’t public knowledge and was not getting the media attention it needed.”

Members of UA sororities and fraterni-
ties routinely remove litter from the banks of the Black Warrior River near campus.

Other University organizations and divisions that partner with Black Warrior Riverkeeper include the Community Ser-
cice Center, the UA Environmental Coun-
cil, the UA Environmental Law Society, UA Museums, the Department of Adver-
tising and Public Relations, UA NAACP and the Student Government Association. Later says she learned countless things through the COM 122 course and her ef-
forts to protect the Black Warrior River, but the most meaningful was the impor-
tance of caring for and taking pride in one’s environment. “So many of us come from different parts of the country for school and may only be here for the four years or take to get a degree, but it is our responsibility to embrace the community that we live in and care for it,” she says.

“With the help of Tuscaloosa residents and UA students, I believe we can make a profound impact on the Black Warrior River.”

Students from Alabama appreciate the experience as well. Caitlin Mc-
Clusky, a recent graduate who majored in interdisciplinary environmental studies, accumulated 300 service hours working on various Black Warrior Riverkeeper projects and won the UA Community Service Center’s Volunteer of the Year award in 2012.

“Helping to protect my local water-
shed and the drinking water supply of my hometown of Birmingham was extremely rewarding because I felt that I was not only helping to protect the environment, but the people dependent on crucial re-
sources within that environment,” McC-
clusky says. “Clean water is absolutely vital to life, and working to promote a healthy watershed inevitably results in the cultivation of healthier communities.”

For more information about ser-
vice-learning and volunteer opportu-
nities with the Black Warrior River-
keeper, see spro.ua.edu or contact Lindsey Thomas at 205-348-6491 or lntomahs@ualan.ua.edu.