

## MARTIN COUNTY

# Hurchalla fighting to protect her world

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Layers of dead leaves crunched under our feet, sunlight filtered through a tangled mess of mangrove branches over our heads, and Maggy Hurchalla led me to the End of the World.

The 72-year-old retiree had been paddling with a steady, powerful energy in her bright yellow RPM Max kayak through unnamed waters that wove through acres of preserved mangroves toward a beach she'd named "The End of the World." She put my aching, 21-year-old arms to shame.

When we finally made it to the End of the World, after I'd made sure to greet every mangrove tree along the way with the nose of my borrowed red kayak, I followed Hurchalla through roots that used to be under water and trees that were older than she could remember. She led me to white-capped waves that stretched for miles and miles along the shore at the northern tip of the St. Lucie Inlet Preserve State Park.

"Here we are," Hurchalla said, and I looked ahead at beige sand fading into light blue water that extended farther than the horizon I could see, farther than the St. Lucie Inlet, farther still into the Atlantic Ocean. "The end of the world."

## ACTIVIST

It's views like this, free from noise pollution and the shadow of high-rise condos, that Maggy Hurchalla has been trying to protect for four decades.

The former county commissioner became active in the political scene once more after the elections in November signaled the end of the pro-development county commission majority era that unseated her in the 1990s. Since then, she has been rewriting chapters 1, 2 and 4 of the Martin County comprehensive plan, has been sued by the Lake Point rock mining company claiming she made "false statements" in an attempt to kill the project, and has had a hammock park named after her for her "significant public service" to the county. She will even be making a surprise guest voice appearance on "The Simpsons" television show at 8 p.m. Sunday on Fox with her sister, former U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno.

That's why her name has been on everyone's lips lately.

"I've only crawled out of my hole recently, which is why there's all this 'Maggy-hysteria,'" Hurchalla said with her familiar gasping laugh.

Despite sticking to the sidelines for years — until the past few months — Hurchalla wears so many hats, touches so many areas of Martin County and the people in it, that some call her the most important person in Martin County.

## ENVIRONMENTALIST

"I like smelling," Hurchalla said, as she pressed the leaves of a tree against her nose and took a deep breath. She broke off a few more clusters of leaves and passed them around to about a dozen hikers from the Hobe Sound Nature Center to smell, as they followed her Tuesday through the trails of the newly renamed Maggy's Hammock Park in Port Salerno.

She greeted ferns and live oaks and mulberry trees like old friends, and she usually had an answer to questions about the old woods that she helped save back in her days as a county commissioner.

"She knows everything!" one hiker whispered to another as Hurchalla prattled off facts about the woods to the group.

Hurchalla grew up in a time where hurricanes were exciting because school was canceled and

everything was wet and waiting to be discovered. In South Miami, she lived on a farm with her mom and dad, Jane and Henry Reno, and her three siblings, Janet, Robert and Mark.

She's always been an explorer, even now.

She travels to North Carolina, to California, to Ecuador, to Panama, and too many places to list to whitewater kayak with her grandchildren or friends. Her preferred method of exercise, she said, is outside, out in nature instead of in a gym, and kayaking has taken her to the most exotic and exciting places.

But she always comes back home to her 45-year-old wooden house on the Intracoastal Waterway.

"You move here because you love it," she said. "You don't move here because you have to."

The Miami she grew up in is long gone now, but she's been fighting for decades to preserve Martin County after moving here in 1968. She wants to spare her adopted hometown the same high-rise development fate. That, she said, is what motivated her to get into politics and run for county commissioner in 1974.

It's what motivates her activism and preservation efforts to this day.

## POLITICIAN

For two decades, Hurchalla was on top.

Under her reign as county commissioner, Martin County created its comprehensive land-use plan and



CHRISTOPHER ARNOLD/TREASURE COAST NEWSPAPERS

Former Martin County Commissioner Maggy Hurchalla watches for boat traffic in the Intracoastal Waterway south of the St. Lucie Inlet before returning home from a kayak excursion in St. Lucie Inlet Preserve State Park on Wednesday.

purchased several woods and wetlands to save them from potential development.

But in 1994, she suffered a crushing defeat to Elmira Gainey, losing by a few thousand votes. Gainey and her supporters ushered in a new era of pro-development or pro-growth, as some call it, in Martin County.

Hurchalla wasn't upset by the loss, she said. The only reason she'd run in the first place was because she had learned from her sister, who she calls Janny, that losing wouldn't actually kill you. Her sister was running for a House seat in Dade County and lost by a thousand votes.

"(When you lose) you realize that everybody kind of walks on the other sidewalk because it's a little like a death in the family," she said. "They're not quite sure what to say."

Now, after years of virtual silence, she's exploded back onto the political scene after the November elections resulted in the diminishing of the previous pro-development commission majority. With the support of this new commission, Hurchalla has been suggesting rewrites to the comprehensive plan that she helped craft several years ago.

"We all know why we're different here in Martin County, and it's because Maggy lives here," said Commission Chairwoman Sarah Heard at an early March commission

meeting, where Hurchalla presented her proposed changes of Chapters 1, 2 and 4 of the comp plan. "No other individual has made a bigger contribution to what Martin County looks like and feels like than Maggy has."

Still, the outpouring of "Maggy-hysteria" hasn't all been glowing and supportive.

Hurchalla's disapproval of the controversial Lake Point mining operation resulted in a lawsuit filed against her for alleged "false statements" about the project.

"Hurchalla is singling out Lake Point and is attempting to put Lake Point out of business," the suit reads.

She had nothing to offer in comment about the ongoing lawsuit except her signature gasping laugh.

President of the Stuart/Martin Chamber of Commerce Joe Catrambone called Maggy a brilliant woman who definitely does her homework when it comes to issues she's passionate about, but he said she has a tendency to be an obstacle and inflexible when it comes to issues she doesn't support.

"I think it's admirable what she's doing," he said of her efforts with the comp plan and activism in the community. "But I don't think it's her place."

## MATRIARCH

Hurchalla and her husband Jim Hurchalla, a retired engineer, have four

## Hurchalla On TV

**Show:** "The Simpsons"  
**Episode:** "Dark Knight Court"  
**When:** 8 p.m. Sunday  
**Channel:** Comcast, channel 11; AT&T, channel 29  
**Summary:** Lisa comes to her brother's defense when Bart is accused of an Easter prank involving the school marching band.

the horn section and some rotten eggs. Meanwhile, Mr. Burns seizes the opportunity to realize his lifelong ambition to become a superhero.  
**Guest appearances:** Former U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno, Former Martin County Commissioner Maggy Hurchalla

## Maggy's Hammock Park

**Description:** On March 5, Rocky Point Hammock Park was renamed to Maggy's Hammock Park.

**Hours:** Sunrise to sunset

**Location:** 3854 S.E. Kubin Ave., Stuart

**Features:** Picnic area, playground, one mile nature trail

## Maggy's Kayak Trip

To see video of Maggy Hurchalla's kayak trip to "The End of the World," visit [TCPalm.com/videos](http://TCPalm.com/videos).

children, Jimmy, Bobby, Jane and George.

After graduating Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania as a psychology major with a minor in biology, Hurchalla raised her four children, who were born about 18 months apart.

She glows with pride when she talks about her grandkids: Kimberly, who attends a small Quaker college in North Carolina, and James, who sometimes joins her on her whitewater kayaking adventures around the world.

"I just got back from whitewater kayaking in Ecuador with my grandson, because it beat going to the hospital exercise class," she said.

Her dad died in the 1960s and her mother in 1992. Her older brother, Robert, was the first of her siblings to pass away last year.

Now, she and her brother Mark alternate every three weeks traveling to Miami to take care of her eldest sister, Janet Reno, who developed Parkinson's disease in 1995. Her sister's illness has left Hurchalla one kayak buddy short.

Her brother has Parkinson's as well, though not as severe as Janet.

"Nobody did (have Parkinson's) before this generation," she said. "We don't know why Janny and Mark have Parkinson's, but they both do."

Hurchalla was diagnosed in 1992 with an autoimmune disease called common variable immunodeficiency, which prevents her body from making antibodies. In the corner behind her kitchen table sits an IV machine that a nurse hooks up to her arm once a month and drips other people's antibodies into her for four hours. Antibodies are cells in the body that fight off infection and disease.

But she laughs her illness off, as she does all things. Despite her health requiring extensive amounts of sleep, despite taking care of her sister three weeks at a time, and despite a whole world of adventures she's yet to have, Maggy Hurchalla remains laughing, and optimistic that she can make a difference, for the better, in Martin County.

"I tried to pay attention to my health," she said. "If you sleep a lot, and you exercise a lot, and you eat well, you survive much better than if you go around trying to save the world."