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JOURNAL REPORTS: RETIREMENT | SECOND ACTS

A Medical Researcher Finds a New Calling as an Environmental Activist

James Mulloy saw 'An Inconvenient Truth,' and it changed his life



James Mulloy (center) gave up a career in medicine to join the ranks of environmental activists trying to stop climate change.
PHOTO: ROB BONNEY

By *Julie Halpert*

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James Mulloy always appreciated the outdoors, but he never was a “tree hugger,” he says.

For the first 25 years of his professional life, his passions were medicine and leukemia research. While a professor of pediatrics at University of Cincinnati Medical Center, Dr. Mulloy directed a research lab where he developed a strain of mice that scientists use to test drugs for leukemia and other diseases.

Then, in 2007, Dr. Mulloy’s life took a turn. He saw the movie “An Inconvenient Truth” and became extremely concerned about climate change. He started paying more attention to climate science, he says, driven in part by the “near consensus” among climate scientists that humans are driving climate change.

JAMES MULLOY

Age: 54

Hometown: Boxford, Mass.

Primary career: Medical educator and researcher

Current path: Environmental activist

Why this path: “It’s such a significant problem. It could keep me busy for a long time.”

“Everything we have built as a species is at risk,” says Dr. Mulloy, who has a Ph.D. in microbiology. “We know the problem. We have the solutions in hand. We simply do not have the political will to implement them,” he says. “As a scientist, I find this baffling and totally unacceptable.”

The issue of climate change gradually moved to the forefront of Dr. Mulloy’s thinking—and his professional life. In 2012, he was part of a group that launched a Cincinnati chapter of Citizens’ Climate Lobby, or CCL, a nonprofit that advocates for policies addressing climate change. Two years later, he set in motion a plan to wind down his career in medical research and move to

Massachusetts, where he was raised, and which he says is “a natural place” for environmental activism, more so than southern Ohio.

In 2016, he began a leave of absence from the medical center, which reduced his responsibilities there, including research-oversight duties at the lab, though for now he continues to oversee three technicians. Dr. Mulloy, who is 54, now lives in Boxford, Mass., with his husband, Robert Bonney, volunteering for CCL as the state coordinator for its North Shore Chapter.

He says he dedicates well over 40 hours a week to helping oversee activities of the nine CCL chapters around the state and 44 chapters around the Northeast. He is also on the steering committee of 350Mass, another climate-change group, and trains volunteers to make presentations on climate change and solutions.

Dr. Mulloy says he has plenty of company when it comes to “white-hair” activists and fellow retirees committed to combating climate change. “I’m a youngster with a ton of energy relative to a lot of people in the group,” he says. “It’s such a significant problem. It could keep me busy for a long time.”

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Last year he helped stage a sit-in that called for a moratorium on pipeline construction in Massachusetts. The target: the office of Gov. Charlie Baker. Dr. Mulloy and five other demonstrators were arrested and removed from Gov. Baker's office by police. The charges were later dropped.

"I assumed my contribution in life would be through my research on leukemia," he says. "But I came to realize how limited in scope this contribution is, and saw that the work on climate change could have a much greater positive effect on a vastly larger number of people."

Second Acts looks at the varied paths people are taking in their 50s and beyond. Email Ms. Halpert, a writer in Michigan, or let us know how you're starting over, at reports@wsj.com.

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