

Community Service Project Creates Water Legacy



In a vibrant and enduring example of a water legacy, more than 220 enthusiastic volunteers joined forces in Saturday's 10th annual Water Environment Federation (WEF) Community Service Project. Participants included members of the WEF Student and Young Professionals Committee (SYPC), organizers of the event, as well as additional volunteers from the WEF House of Delegates and Board of Trustees, according to Caroline Pakenham, association engagement manager of SYPC.

"This is all done by WEF students and young professionals and our partners ... and it's just amazing to see the community of people that come together to do this," Pakenham said. "The fact that they are so passionate about doing this and put this much work into it is just absolutely incredible, and we can't thank them enough."

This year's effort, "Manierre's Sustainable Stormwater Project," took place at Chicago's Manierre Elementary School, where volunteers spent the day constructing a bioswale with native plants and a permeable outdoor classroom area.

The existing asphalt playground experienced flooding issues, explained project chair Anthony Giovannone. "They did some work on the drain to mitigate it, but we took it to the next level and we're actually turning the impervious surface into a pervious one," he said. "We're doing that through basically three means. We have a native garden area that will retain some water. We also have an outdoor classroom with permeable pavers and a retention area underneath it, and also a bioswale."

Giovannone said the committee

begins work on the following year's service project as the current WEFTEC® concludes, and plans over the entire year. Project proposals solicited from the host location generate four or five potential sites, with the committee using established criteria to select the project. Manierre Elementary was a compelling winner this year, he said, because of staff commitment and engagement, and because they had a water-related issue with clear need.

Giovannone expressed amazement at the amount of support they receive for the project from sponsors, donors and partners such as the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago and the Department of Water Management. "It shocks me how willing they are to participate," he said.

After the project is complete, a maintenance fund supports follow-up to assist in caring for the site, Giovannone said.

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In a coordinated water education effort, the day prior to the project saw volunteers conducting the WaterPalooza event at the school, during which groups of students traveled to stations featuring hands-on activities teaching the value of water and the local water environment. The event teaches students about several specific areas of the water quality industry, Giovannone said, and the service project reinforces those concepts.

Giovannone highlighted three goals of this project: to impact water quality and the community and do something that benefits their water environment; to create community awareness of the value of water; and to serve as inspiration. "I think it's our water legacy as students and young professionals to inspire the next generation of water quality professionals," he said.

Volunteer Maria Reed was involved in the project's planning and was

instrumental in plant selection for the endeavor.

"I understood this was a big project, but not until I got here did I understand the dimension of it, the impact it's going to have on the students," she said. Because the students will have a role in maintaining the gardens, she added, "it has aspects of STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics] for students to see if they like it and if this is something they could pursue in the future."

Speaking at the ribbon-cutting ceremony, WEF president Rick Warner echoed that concept. "The project that we're sitting right next to here is not only beautiful, but it's going to hopefully inspire young professionals and young students about environmental stewardship in a place to learn and grow their minds," he said, "much like these beautiful plants and flowers are going to grow as well."

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"People are the key to solving the challenges and embracing the opportunities we have ahead. So the core question is, 'How do we get the most out of our people? How do we help them maximize the impact of their careers?'"

Ferguson shared his own story about the impact of mentors in his life while transitioning from an acting career to working on climate and sustainability issues, and their ongoing effect throughout his professional path.

"Effective mentorship is a skill," he said. Think about how to send the elevator of opportunity back down for the next generation of water professionals. Think about how to formalize mentorship within your institution so you are making full use of the accumulated experience before it leaves to go fishing."

Joan Rose of Michigan State University described her entry into the microbiology world after taking her first look down a microscope in college, amazed at the world that existed there.

Describing her career path, Rose emphasized the value of mentorship and collaboration as she reached out to as many individuals in all disciplines as she could. "I became a better microbiologist and a better teacher," she said.

Ifetayo Venner of Arcadis shared how growing up on the beach in Barbados developed into a career in water and environmental issues, describing mentors' influence along the way. "It is rewarding to be able to give back to the profession and to mentor promising young professionals who are so critical to the future of our industry," she said.

Carla Reid of Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission concluded the program by describing several "types" of mentors, including what she called a "provocative mentor," one with good intentions but terrible advice.

"That encounter taught me an incredibly valuable life lesson," she said. "A mentor can show you the path, but you are the one who has to walk down that path."

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