

## New opportunities and hands-on education in the preserves



This past summer Aziz Hunter completed his third year working for the Forest Preserve Experience. He worked as a crew leader and recommends the program to other high school students. “..It’s really a variety of experiences all rolled into one.”

When Aziz Hunter’s mother signed him up for the Forest Preserve Experience program, he was apprehensive. While he had visited the forest preserves before, Aziz didn’t know if he’d like working there, or even what exactly he would do. Fast forward to today, and Aziz has finished his third year in the Forest Preserve Experience program as an assistant crew leader and can recommend the program to other high schoolers looking for interesting summer work.

“It gives people a first job experience, that was the initial thing for me—but it’s not just work,” Aziz said. “They’re giving you environmental education as well as giving you the chance for a hands-on effect on the environment. And while you’re getting paid, there’s all kinds of opportunities as well. So it’s really a variety of experiences all rolled into one.”

The Forest Preserve Experience was launched in 2016 and is part of an effort to introduce and recruit young people to conservation jobs in Cook County and elsewhere. Friends of the Forest Preserves partners with the Forest Preserves of Cook County and the Housing Authority of Cook County, with support from the Cook County Bureau of Economic Development, the Forest Preserve

*New Opportunities continued on page 2*

## Summer programs strengthen connection to nature

*By Melissa Agarwal, Associate Program Director*

Summertime is the busiest and most anticipated season at Friends, with an abundance of restoration projects and high school summer programs. This summer, Friends programs engaged 179 high school students in forest preserves throughout Cook County to work, learn, and connect with nature.

In 2021, Friends managed the largest Forest Preserves Experience program to date, developed a brand-new

high-school summer program at Beaubien Woods, and supported the Chicago Conservation Leadership Corps high-school summer program. High-school programs are an integral component of the Conservation Corps programs that build the capacity of this next generation of conservation leaders. In these programs youth gain valuable, real-world skills in restoration ecology; they build networks of professional support; and they gain vital skills in teamwork, time management, and leadership that prepare them for successful careers.

*Strengthening The Connection continued on page 7*

## Randall joins park elites with national award

A hard-earned and well deserved national recognition for the leader of the Forest Preserves of Cook County puts Arnold Randall in the ranks of conservation elites like Stephen Mather, the founder and first director of the National Park Service; landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.; and Charles “Cap” Sauer, the first superintendent of the FPCC.

Randall, along with Elizabeth Kessler, received the Cornelius Amory Pugsley Medal for Parks and Conservation on September 15 at a virtual presentation hosted by the American Academy for Park and Recreation Administration. Kessler, the first female executive director of the McHenry County Conservation District, an analog to a forest preserve district, led the District in the passage of a \$73 million voter-approved referendum along with other significant accomplishments. First awarded in 1928, the Honorable Cornelius Amory Pugsley Medal is the most prestigious award to recognize outstanding contributions to the promotion and development of public parks and conservation in the United States.

“Arnold has overseen a turnaround of the Forest Preserves of Cook County and it was certainly no easy task,” said Benjamin Cox, executive director of Friends of the Forest Preserves. “Arnold not only listens to partners, but he acts on our recommendations and he and the great staff he has put in place take our recommendations to the next level. The preserves, the plants and animals that find refuge in them, and all of us benefit from their work.”

Randall is responsible for the day-to-day management of the nation’s oldest and largest forest preserve system. Since his appointment in 2010, Randall has developed the ambitious Next Century Conservation Plan, a multi-year



FPCC General Superintendent Arnold Randall, right, shares his experiences with conservation corps members Dyrell Williams and Lance Williams.

centennial celebration focused on bringing new and diverse audiences to the preserves and launching strategic plans for camping, recreation, trails, and habitat restoration. Randall has created an independent advisory Conservation and Policy Council of civic and business leaders.

The Pugsley Medal is provided in association with the National Park Foundation, the official philanthropic partner of the National Park Service.

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*New Opportunities continued from page 1*

Foundation, and the Christopher Family Foundation to provide jobs for teens over five weeks in the summer.

On a typical day, Aziz and his crew arrived at 8 a.m., did an ice-breaker activity to start the day, and spent the morning clearing invasive species that crowd out native plants. After a few hours of conservation work, Aziz and his team learned about environmental topics like climate change, environmental racism, and the history of Cook County’s natural habitats. They finished the day with more conservation work before heading home. Seeing environmental

issues like invasive species up close and getting to have a concrete effect on these issues made Aziz feel good and that his work was important.

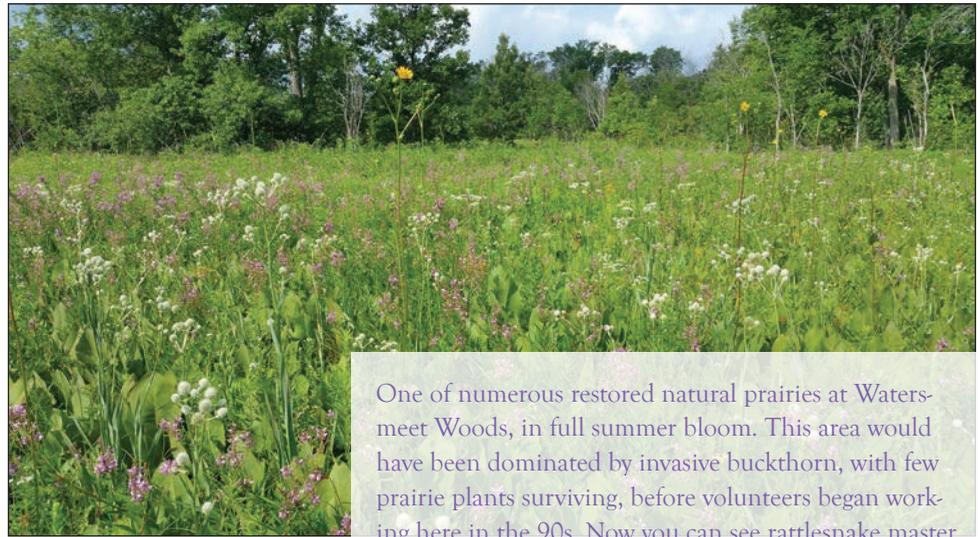
“It’s valuable that you are able to affect your environment. Conservation isn’t a bad thing. It’s not something you should be afraid to get into,” Aziz said. “The program isn’t for everyone, and it’s okay to be apprehensive about something you’re not sure you’re going to want to be doing for five weeks. It’s going to push people out of their comfort zones and if it’s not for you, that’s fine—but at least give it a try, I’d say.”

# The view from Watersmeet has never been better

by Eileen Sutter, Volunteer

Watersmeet Prairie Grove was a series of small rooms of prairie and woodland, separated by thick walls of buckthorn and other non-native woody plants, when I first started working there in the late 1990s. Each room had its native species: willow aster, Riddell's goldenrod, early goldenrod, bottle gentian, and little bluestem in the prairie; swamp goldenrod, marsh marigold, and sedges in the woods. But between the rooms was mostly darkness and bare dirt.

Volunteers began slowly opening up spaces, clearing out buckthorn, and planting native plant seed, making great progress on the west side in 2012 to 2016. In 2020, Watersmeet was awarded a Five Star Grant, which funded the Friends of the Forest Preserves North Branch conservation corps crew to do significant



One of numerous restored natural prairies at Watersmeet Woods, in full summer bloom. This area would have been dominated by invasive buckthorn, with few prairie plants surviving, before volunteers began working here in the 90s. Now you can see rattlesnake master (*Eryngium yuccifolium*) and slender mountain mint (*Pycnanthemum tenuifolium*) with white flowers, Illinois tick trefoil (*Desmodium illinoense*) in purple, and prairie dock (*Silphium terebinthinaceum*) with yellow flowers on tall stalks.



This is the workday that started it all! A partnership that would last over a year was forged on February 2, 2019, at Watersmeet Woods. It was a snowy day filled with smiles and hope for the wonderful things to come.

clearing in the woods and around an ephemeral pond at the prairie's edge. The crew persevered through tough winter conditions, with up to 3-feet of snow on the ground in mid-February. The roar of their chainsaws and the crackle of their brush pile burns fires were welcome sounds.

This spring, light filled the floor of the wet woods, and marsh marigold made a comeback, 600 plants under ancient bur and swamp white oaks. Now those old oaks have



Thanks to a collaborative effort, volunteers and Friends' Conservation Corps crews cleared a significant amount of invasive brush at Watersmeet Woods in Northfield, where native plants and animals now thrive. Photo by Eileen Sutter

enough light for their acorns to grow tall. Great blue lobelia, cardinal flower, and turtlehead flourish in openings. For the first time in memory, we can see from the south edge of the woods all the way to the prairie and the neighborhood beyond. This past COVID-spring, kids from the neighborhood chased each other along the paths, no longer confined to small rooms. Thanks to the work of the North Branch crew, the view from Watersmeet has never been better.

# 12th Annual Photo Contest Winners

Thank you to everyone who submitted entries! The winning photographs illustrate the diversity of beauty and life found in our forest preserves. They serve as inspiration and a call to action to protect and care for these special places. Visit [fotfp.org/photo-contest](http://fotfp.org/photo-contest) to see all the past winners and find out how to submit your photos to our current photo contest.



(1) **FIRST PLACE:** “Blue Glow at Sunset,” Great blue heron at LaBagh Woods in Chicago by Corrina DeLorenzo. (2) **SECOND PLACE:** “Like an Eagle” at Busse Woods in Elk Grove Village by Maria Sacha. (3) **THIRD PLACE:** “Unexpected visitor,” Pileated woodpecker at Busse Woods in Rolling Meadows by Carlos Molano. (4) **BEST FAUNA:** “Snowy Egrets” at Burnham Prairie in Burnham by David Gruver. (5) **BEST FLORA:** “Spring beauty and blue violets” at Busse Woods in Elk Grove Village by Maria Sacha.



**(1) BEST YOUTH PHOTOGRAPHER:** “Running in the Sunlight” at Linne Woods in Morton Grove by Arwa Ghomrawi. **(2) BEST PEOPLE IN THE PRESERVES (Top Right):** “Golden” at Camp Bullfrog Lake in Willow Springs by Jeanne Ayers. **HONORABLE MENTIONS:**



**(3)** “Buck in the Forest” at Linne Woods in Morton Grove by Carlos Molano. **(4)** “Autumn blooms,” Buckeye butterfly on asters at Wolf Road Prairie in Westchester by Fidencio Marbella. **(5)** “American Lotus” at Tomahawk Slough, Wolf Road Woods in Palos Township by Christine Karge Dewey. **(6)** “Scarlet Tanager” at McCormick Woods in North Riverside by Rosie Callaghan (youth). **(7)** “Dashing through the Fog” at Busse Woods in Elk Grove Village by Michelle Puszka. **(8)** “Eastern Amberwing” at Deer Grove East in Palatine by Janet Haugen. **(9)** “Awash in Blue” at Linne Woods in Morton Grove by Darlene Grossman. **(10)** “Indigo Bunting” at McCormick Woods in North Riverside by Adeline Callaghan (youth). **(11)** “Golden Hour” (sawtooth sunflowers) Wolf Road Prairie by Fidencio Marbella.



# A new perspective on engagement in Calumet

By Sydney Armstead, Engagement Program Manager

It is not always easy to enter into a new community and present things that seem out of the ordinary.

“We need more organizers and people being consistent. Just doing something once is an event, but to continue to do it and set goals is a good idea,” said Riverdale resident Tamara Ragland when asked about community concerns during a focus group.

Friends of the Forest Preserves’ goal is to build and put in place an engagement strategy that fosters meaningful connections between communities and their local forest preserves. Intentional focus on engaging a greater diversity of people will help break down barriers so that these public lands are welcoming and beneficial for more of Cook County’s residents.

As I navigate through different communities, engagement requires a range of approaches, and it is imperative to consider the emotional and physical accessibility of a site. Physical access may be impeded by barriers of transportation, technology, and lack of suitable trails or wayfinding tools. Emotional barriers may be feelings of unsafety or a fear of not being welcomed for people of different races, ages, or genders.

When attending programs, people feel welcomed when the hosts greet them, seem interested and happy they came, and engage them in conversation to get to know them and their interests. It is essential to keep listening and adapting to include gestures, language, or activities at events to help people feel like they belong.

Friends is employing several strategies to start combating lack of access to preserves. From simply chatting with neighbors while passing out flyers to hiring local community



Volunteer Bridgette Goodwin of South Holland, IL and community leader Cheryl Sublette of Dolton, IL enjoying their time at Whistler Woods collecting seeds to be used in restoration in the preserves. Bridgette and Cheryl are just two of many dedicated volunteers at Whistler Woods. Bird walks, stewardship days, focus groups... These two are engaged!



This photo was taken after the very first yoga class at Whistler Woods on June 23rd, 2021. Participants showed up eager to participate after flyers were left at their doors, drawing a wide representation of members from the south suburbs of Chicago. The yoga program was the first of its kind in the region and was so popular that they were extended two months, running for a total of four months.

members as connectors to new networks, we are finding what works to help chip away at barriers.

We hired community leaders to help bridge the gap and strengthen our relationship in Riverdale to engage people at Whistler Woods. Local residents Cheryl Sublette, Candace Williams, and Donna Denson have been pivotal and bring a unique role in the process, by being present to welcome others at events, gathering participants from their networks, and encouraging others to join them in volunteering at stewardship workdays.

Cheryl is helping lead focus groups and where we met community member Khameelah Bailey. “If we (continue to) do something like this, it will show that we are setting an example,” Khameelah said, “I am hopeful that people will hop on board with us.”

Relationship building is a goal and, so far, the group that is forming is eager to influence more people to engage in the preserves.

“Most of those places have activities that are scheduled, and that is what draws people,” said local resident Sheryl Lewis about what encourages people to participate outdoors. “Naturally we would want to see that here (at Whistler Woods).”

Building connections takes extra effort and creativity, but using a hyperlocal approach is the key to increase engagement. We’ve seen that regularly scheduled wellness, cultural, and recreational programs foster social bonds between participants and that folks want more of these.

All of our programs will be designed, conducted, and adapted to ensure that a greater diversity of people fall in love with the preserves by meeting them where they’re at.

*Strengthening The Connection continued from page 1*

The Beaubien Woods Youth Corps completed its inaugural program in partnership with the Forest Preserves of Cook County. The Illinois Department of Natural Resources awarded a Coastal Management grant to the Forest Preserves of Cook County for the funding. This unique program engaged 13 participants to learn how to lead public engagement activities at Beaubien for members of their community, in addition to hands-on restoration skills.

“This program is perfect for any community because it brings different people together in one place to unite and bring changes to the forest preserves in their community,” crew member Tristin Finney reflected.



*Above:* Members of the Beaubien Woods Youth Corps carry mulch to improve trails at Beaubien Woods on the Southeast Side of Chicago. *Right:* Tristin Finney was one of 13 participants to graduate from the inaugural Beaubien Woods Youth Corps this past summer. “This program is perfect for any community...”

The crew worked hard to mulch and clear invasive brush along the CHA Trail and Carver Trail to increase visibility and create more welcoming trails for the community.

This was the sixth year of the Forest Preserve Experience program and also the largest program to date. A staggering 127 high school participants worked at seven sites throughout the southern and western suburbs to clear seven acres of woody invasives, contributing over 8,180 hours of conservation service to restore the forest preserves.

“This program is not for everyone... It does take a lot of dedication to be getting up that early in the morning

and to be coming and working. But it’s a very valuable experience. It’s something that I think a lot of people wish they had... It’s there, and you should definitely be taking advantage of a resource that’s such a valuable thing,” said Aziz Hunter, Sweet Woods assistant crew leader. “And it’s not just working—it’s environmental education. And it’s valuable that you’ll be able to help nature get better.”

In addition to challenging restoration work and environmental education, crew members experienced many environmental recreation activities, including yoga, fishing with the Chicago Park District, hiking at the Indiana Dunes, and a wilderness survival course.

This past summer marked the impressive 12th year of



the Chicago Conservation Leadership Corps. Friends, in partnership with the Forest Preserves and the Student Conservation Association, with support from the Forest Preserve Foundation, engaged 39 high-school youth to work in the forest preserves on conservation and trail projects.

The participants worked at four forest preserve nature centers and Dan Ryan Woods.

Notable projects included: The Dan Ryan Woods crew constructed a turnpike on a part of a trail that is notorious for being wet and muddy. The Little Red Schoolhouse crew created an art project that added hand-painted benches to their trails. The Sand Ridge Nature Center crew removed invasive species. The River Trail crew designed a painting project for their pollinator garden. In addition to projects, participants were fortunate to work and learn from naturalists who provided a number of environmental education programs.

A post-program survey found that 95 percent of participants would recommend the program to a friend. Overall, youth gained valuable knowledge and work experience from their participation and they had a great time doing it.



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# Connect with the Friends community