

# Friends NEWS

Benjamin Cox, editor • benjamin@fotfp.org | Volume 24, Issue 1 • Cook County, Illinois • Winter 2024



## Thank you, congratulations, but not goodbye Superintendent Randall

By Benjamin Cox, Executive Director

It is with great pleasure that Friends of the Forest Preserves extends our appreciation and congratulations to Arnold Randall as he completed his service as General Superintendent of the Forest Preserves of Cook County January 23 and started his next chapter the week after. The forest preserves and their facilities, as well as how the government is run, are in a far superior place than when Superintendent Randall took on the role 13 years ago.

Full credit is due to the leadership of Superintendent Randall and to President Toni Preckwinkle for fully supporting his work to transform the FPCC.

Ecological restoration and engagement of Cook County residents with the preserves are now top level priorities. The number of acres under active management for restoration has tripled to 15,000, with sights set on increasing that to 30,000 in the near term. The FPCC's prescribed fire program has developed to be one of the largest in the country. Conservation corps programs for youth and adults have greatly increased, involving many more participants annually. The way that volunteers are included and supported is significantly improved.

Recreational opportunities are now greatly expanded and diversified with the five reopened or newly built campgrounds; the vastly expanded trail system; and facilities like pavilions, renovated bathrooms and the addition of port-o-lets, and outdoor stairs for exercise. Superintendent Randall led the addition of the Conservation and Experiential Programming Department, which offers hundreds of programs throughout the year both in the preserves and in communities across the county.

All of this makes the preserves more welcoming, enjoyable, and better for plants and animals.



*General Superintendent Arnold Randall shares his long list of accomplishments during the January meeting of the Board of Commissioners of the Forest Preserves of Cook County. Many thanks to President Toni Preckwinkle for empowering Randall and his team to bring extensive reform and improvements to the forest preserves in Cook County and the government charged with caring for them.*

Staff management and the systems that make up the government have been dramatically improved. Not an easy task, but one that ensures this government is run more efficiently, effectively, and with the focus on the primary mission of the Forest Preserves to hold land, together with its plants and animals, for the education, enjoyment, and recreation of the people of Cook County. From performance reviews and job descriptions, to a human resources department and a focus on welcoming the public, the FPCC is in a much better place thanks to Superintendent Randall.

His leadership and these improvements are what allowed Friends, together with our partner organizations, to lead the campaign to pass a referendum for the FPCC in 2022. With nearly 70% of voters supporting the ballot measure, we can all celebrate the permanent addition of more than \$40 million per year in new funding to support conservation of the forest preserves for us and future generations.

*Continued on page 7...*

# Tree work profession calling for Friends' alum

By Benjamin Cox, Executive Director

Xochitl Lopez now knows that hands-on tree work is her calling. But when she began her journey, she knew she wanted to be involved with conservation, but didn't quite know how.

Like so many folks in the conservation field, Xochitl thought she wanted to be a veterinarian, but "organic chemistry was rough" and her independent study on whether or not zoos had an impact on conservation had her wondering.

At Northeastern Illinois University, she took a course on restoration ecology.

"And that's when things really clicked," she said. "The hands-on part sounded great to me because it meant people can really have an impact."

Her focus then went from the classroom to the field—a battlefield, that is. In 2011, Xochitl spent a summer in Maryland as a natural resource intern, herbiciding, chainsawing, and maintaining trails at a national battlefield. The site is managed by the National Park Service and she worked there with the Student Conservation Association, a long-time partner with Friends of the Forest Preserves.

Thankfully, following that experience, Xochitl joined Friends of the Forest Preserves as a crew member on our first ever year-round adult conservation corps crew. Funded by the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, the crew focused on removing invasive species, collecting seeds, and other work to improve sites in the Calumet Region at places like the prairie at Kickapoo Woods in Riverdale.

After that experience, she went to work for Stantec, a large restoration contractor, where she worked for four years.

"It was different from conservation corps...much longer hours," she said.

"I really enjoyed it because the people I worked with really cared about conservation work.

They really taught me a lot."



Xochitl Lopez, a former Friends' Palos Conservation Crew Manager, now works for the Cook County Department of Transportation and Highways where she is very happy to get to focus on tree work.

But the weather-dependent role meant a lack of stability at times, requiring her to spend vacation time to fill the gaps when work was on hold and required her to have a second job at Whole Foods to make ends meet. She was looking for a better work-life balance.

Soon after, she met Raquel Garcia-Alvarez with the Forest Preserves of Cook County at an Environmentalists of Color meeting. Raquel encouraged Xochitl to apply for FPCC jobs. She applied for many FPCC positions and landed a part-time role as a Stewardship Program Aide. In that role, Xochitl worked part time for almost a year helping to lead volunteer days with forest preserve site stewards.

Then Friends was fortunate enough to have her in our ranks a second time. This time as a manager of a conservation corps crew, where she worked in the Palos region for three years.

"I did really enjoy working with Friends," she said. "I don't think I would have gotten a chance to be in a manager position at another organization. This gave me a chance to expand my skills to another level. I had the confidence to do it at Friends."

“ This gave me a chance to expand my skills to another level. I had the confidence to do it at Friends. ”

- Xochitl Lopez



# Summer program continues to connect youth to forest preserves

By Hannah Miller, Program Manager



First-time Forest Preserve Experience crew member Sin'que Dorsey learned that their yard had a ton of poison ivy in it and gained important job skills last summer.

**“My favorite experience this summer was identifying poison ivy. I realized that I had a bunch of it in my backyard after learning about how to identify it at work. I also enjoyed going canoeing for the first time with my crew and learning how to contribute back to nature.”**

**- Sin'que, Midlothian Meadows B crew member**

FPE started in 2016 and over the past eight years has employed more than 900 high school students and adult leaders. FPE is a paid job that connects participants to forest preserves in their own communities. The high school students gain valuable, real-work skills in environmental restoration and learn about environmental issues. They also build their networks and gain essential skills in teamwork and leadership to prepare them for their future careers.

“One thing I learned this summer was what buckthorn was and how it made its way into the United States,” Sin'que said. “I want to gain as much knowledge as possible from the Forest Preserve Experience program.”

Over the past eight years the program has focused on exposing youth from the south suburbs of Cook County to the forest preserves, restoration work, and different environmental topics. In recent years there has been an even more intentional focus on providing members with job readiness skills to prepare them for future careers.

The program engaged 78 high school students at five forest preserves in the southland. Over the course of five weeks, the crews cleared roughly two acres of land with the goal of improving habitat for native plants and animals and sight lines for preserve visitors. They also attended experiential learning activities including wildlife demonstrations, water quality testing, yoga, Cooler in the Forest, canoeing, wilderness survival, and trips to the Indiana Dunes, Brookfield Zoo, and the Chicago Botanic Gardens. In addition, members take part in environmental education and career readiness lessons, including invasive species identification and topics focused on climate change, environmental justice, financial literacy, resume building, and mock interviewing.



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**Large photo:** First time crew member, Sin'que, second from the left, learned ways to contribute to nature while working with the Midlothian Meadows B Crew, a part of the Forest Preserve Experience summer conservation corps program.

**Inset photo:** Midlothian Meadows B team members Lytia and Zaniyah improved habitat for wildlife and plants while learning job readiness skills and forming new friendships.



# A fundraiser becomes a favorite festival

By Ilana Federman, Associate Director of Development and Communications

When Friends of the Forest Preserves decided to pivot away from the traditional gala-style fundraiser in 2017, we couldn't have imagined amassing such a huge following for our new concept: a beer festival in the forest preserves. We thought it was a winning idea, but we've been humbled by the number of people who have supported the event year after year, many making it an annual tradition.

Each year at the end of September, Beer in the Woods is held in the picturesque picnic groves of LaBagh Woods on the northwest side of Chicago. More often than not, the weather is spectacular. The high heat of the summer has diminished and the rains of autumn have not yet arrived. It's a great time to be in the forest preserves.

A fundraiser in the woods felt right. We wanted to get back to our roots—figuratively and literally—by bringing more people outside to experience the magic of the preserves.

This past year nearly 1,400 beer and nature enthusiasts joined the Friends community to raise \$84,000 to support our advocacy work, Conservation Corps programs, and community engagement initiatives. Of-age attendees were able to select samples from 33 breweries, cideries, and meaderies. And people of all ages were treated to nature programming including nature walks, nature-inspired crafts, and live animals from FrogLady Presentations and Northern Illinois Raptor Rehab and Education Center.

Beer in the Woods is fun, fantastical even. There's a subtle alchemy achieved by bringing like-minded people together to

enjoy the simple pleasures of nature, community, and fermented beverages. It seems our instincts were correct.

Now, we hope we can make it an even better fundraiser. Which is why we're currently seeking sponsors at all levels for the 8th Annual Beer in the Woods to be held Saturday, September 21, 2024. If you or someone you know is interested in supporting our work through a sponsorship, please contact Ilana Federman at [ilana@fotfp.org](mailto:ilana@fotfp.org) or call 312-356-9990 ext. 305.

Mark your calendars! You won't want to miss this magical event.



Dozens of breweries from around the region participated in Beer in the Woods last September, including newcomers Liquid Love Brewing from Buffalo Grove.



**Above, left:** Beer in the Woods has become an annual tradition for many attendees who come year after year for the great beer and the good vibes. It will be held on September 21 this year.

**Above, right:** The festival features well-known local craft breweries like On Tour Brewing and Old Irving Brewing Co. There are also exciting new breweries to discover, like SomosMonos Cervecería from Chicago.

Beer in the Woods photography:  
Lynn Renee Photography

**Above:** Marianna Herrera, far left, a Postdoctoral Researcher at Chicago Botanic Garden, led nature walks through LaBagh Woods focusing on the magical properties of fungi at Beer in the Woods.

## Tree work... *Continued from page 2*

The FPCC lured Xochitl away when she landed a coveted Resource Technician job. The new position led to better pay and the opportunity to gain experience and expand her skills even further as she worked with heavy equipment and obtained her commercial driver's license.

"There is less physical labor involved because you use more equipment," she said. "All the heavy lifting is done by the Bobcat or Prentice Log Loader."

Conservation corps crews cut things up into smaller pieces and do a lot of physical hauling of the material, whereas the heavy equipment can do the lifting instead.

Then Xochitl's supervisor suggested that she apply for a job with the Cook County Department of Transportation and Highways, where even better pay awaited. While the job is still outdoors, it does involve a wider range of responsibilities

ranging from pothole patching and construction to tree trimming and other unpleasanties like roadside cleanup.

"I do miss being in the forest preserves," she said.

But she is still getting to focus on tree work, which she really enjoys.

"It's what I've been doing most of my life and I do like the labor part of my job," she said, adding that she couldn't work at a desk indoors.

And, she does get to spend time working in the forest preserves as a volunteer site steward with Raquel at what might be the best-named preserve in the system, Possum Hollow Woods near Westchester. They host monthly volunteer days that encourage the Latinx community to get outdoors, help protect oaks and water systems, and connect with nature.

# Exploring the Des Plaines River on foot

*This is a personal account from Dan Witte, Friends member and hiking enthusiast*

I hadn't planned to hike the whole Des Plaines River, but we all do things we hadn't planned on doing. And it didn't end up being the whole river, just the parts that are publicly viewable by foot, which it turns out is around 102 of its 133 miles—some of which admittedly stretches the definition of what's actually "public", and what constitutes a "hike".

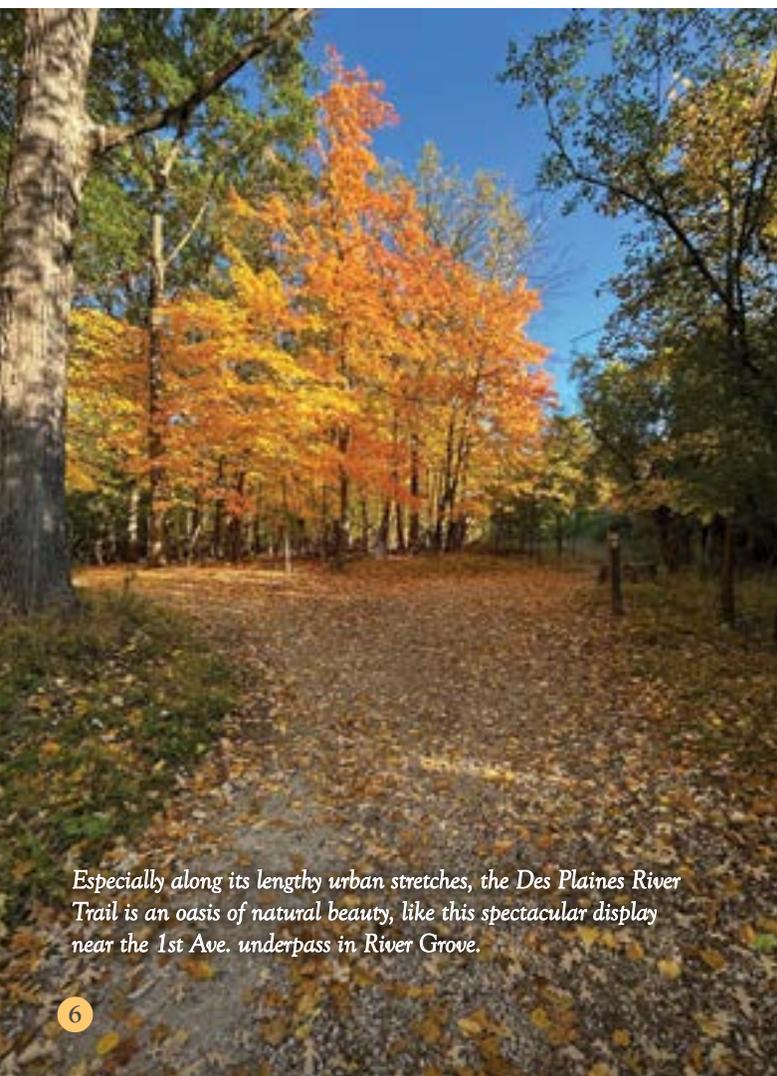
This quest I didn't know I was on started on an unseasonably warm day in late 2022 when I stopped by the Trailside Museum of Natural History in River Forest simply to see the resident raptors and then kept on going out to the Red Primitive trail. Running alongside the river's east bank through Thatcher Woods, not far from my childhood home in River Grove, brought me as close to the river as I'd been since falling through its ice over 50 years ago and trudging home to my mother's wrath. I was surprised that the river was much cleaner than I remembered, and I suppose it was during this hike that I first began wondering about the state of the river in general these days, and how much of it an old guy like me would be able to hike.

So over the course of about 10 weeks last winter, I trekked to every place on the Des Plaines accessible by foot, from the river's source in Union Grove, Wisconsin to its confluence with the Illinois River in Channahon, urged on in equal measure by curiosity and fear of cabin fever. Most of the miles I covered were on amazing public trails, mainly in preserves and parks, but also on streets, sidewalks, bridges and train tracks, and a few places it turns out are not technically publicly accessible and/or not accessible by foot. But I went there anyway.

The Des Plaines is the epitome of an urban river, and though other examples can be found all over the world, few have been as consequential to a region's, a country's, or a continent's history. As rivers go, the Mississippi gets a lot of attention, of course, as does the St. Lawrence, both critically important trade and transportation routes in North America, but it's only because of the Des Plaines River that they have any physical link to one another.

A visit to the Chicago Portage National Historic Site, which is a forest preserve of Cook County in suburban Lyons, helps explain this important piece of Chicago and American history. It's a short journey south from there to trails that run between the river and the two canals that ultimately linked the Des Plaines to Lake Michigan: the now derelict Illinois and Michigan (I&M) Canal, and the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal, which famously reversed the Chicago River when it opened in 1900.

You can hike the Des Plaines River Trail from the Wisconsin border all the way to Sunset Bridge Meadow on North Avenue, around 58 miles total, passing through beautiful forest preserves in Lake and Cook Counties—which I know because I did, both



*Especially along its lengthy urban stretches, the Des Plaines River Trail is an oasis of natural beauty, like this spectacular display near the 1st Ave. underpass in River Grove.*



*Trail marker at Dam #4 Woods in Jan. 2023, where I learned that there are no more dams, even though several forest preserves remain named for them.*



*Behind me is Skinner Island, the point where the Kankakee River (background) and Des Plaines River (foreground) merge to form the Illinois River, near Channahon.*

directions and several times now. In addition there are trails behind Trailside that run along the river, and there is also the 12-mile Centennial Trail starting in Columbia Woods off Willow Springs Road, where you can hike (or bike) between the river and the two canals.

The DPRT winds through the sprawling Des Plaines watershed north of Lyons, and the Centennial Trail through the dramatic Des Plaines River Valley to the south—natural features so obscured by urban development that many of us hardly even notice their existence. But I've walked literally hundreds of miles through both, and that was my inspiration for supporting Friends of the Forest Preserves.

Our natural world is under constant threat, and worse, by a combination of runaway development and lack of awareness, yet I am grateful to the concerned organizations actively protecting, preserving, and restoring these vital native habitats. Selfless volunteers work with a variety of groups to address environmental concerns all along the Des Plaines River, and all throughout the many forest preserves in Cook County, and the Friends community's diligent and dedicated caretaker work complements and reinforces the Forest Preserve mission.

Thanks to the fine work of these groups, we can all explore a river we've lived with and have likely taken for granted most of our lives.

I've personally discovered so much that I decided to build a website about it. Please visit [TheDesPlaines.com](http://TheDesPlaines.com) if you're interested in learning more about the river, and all the places where you can hike and experience it yourself.

## Thank you...

*Continued from page 1*

Deputy Superintendent Eileen Figel will serve as the Interim General Superintendent as a national search is conducted.

We are fortunate to have worked with Superintendent Randall and look forward to continuing our collaboration through his new role as the Executive Director of the Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation.

Again, thank you and congratulations, Arnold.



*Deputy General Superintendent Eileen Figel*

## Summer program...

*Continued from page 3*

The Midlothian Meadows B crew removed a dense stand of woody shrubs at their forest preserve site, mainly buckthorn, in order to allow sunlight to get to the ground for native species to grow. Under the supervision of their crew leaders, Keyon Butler, a long-time FPE participant, Abbey Hayes, and Kaye Graham, the crew tackled the extensive number of buckthorn plants and cleared their whole assigned work area. The crew felt excited and were proud of their accomplishment when they saw the before-and-after photos.

This past summer was all about learning not only for the members but also for program staff. A professional evaluator observed and interviewed current members and alumni. They provide a number of insights and recommendations for additions to the program that will be implemented in the coming years, continuing to build upon this amazing program.

The program is a collaboration coordinated by Friends of the Forest Preserves in partnership with the Forest Preserves of Cook County, with generous support from the Cook County Bureau of Economics, the Housing Authority of Cook County, the Forest Preserve Foundation, and others.



When Forest Preserve Experience crews aren't helping our forest preserves thrive, they participate in experiential learning activities. This past summer, some crews enjoyed a day at Brookfield Zoo where they learned about wildlife and local conservation efforts.



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Thanks to your ongoing support, the Friends community has been hard at work for 25 years protecting, promoting, and caring for our forest preserves. Help us start the year strong with a generous donation to ensure the forest preserves are here for us now and generations to come. Visit [fofp.org](http://fofp.org), scan the QR code, or mail a check to the address above. Thank you!



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*Great Horned Owl in Northbrook  
by Monika Bobek Lupa*



**FRIDAY**  
**6.07.24**

**Register now!**  
**Friends Golf Outing**  
George Dunne National Golf Course, Oak Forest

**SATURDAY**  
**9.21.24**

**Save the Date!**  
**8th Annual Beer in the Woods**  
LaBagh Woods, Chicago

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