

Friends NEWS

Benjamin Cox, Editor • benjamin@fotfp.org • Volume 25, Issue 2 • Cook County, Illinois • Fall 2025



Friends community welcomes new Superintendent Bianchi

By Benjamin Cox, Executive Director

As just the sixth person to be named General Superintendent in the 111-year old Forest Preserves of Cook County, Friends of the Forest Preserves is excited to see Adam Bianchi bringing a new perspective on conservation and partnership to forest preserves. Friends welcomed him with a reception in October attended by a wide variety of Friends community members, giving him a good idea of what Friends is all about: partners, volunteers, dedicated staff and board members, donors and members, and more.

Superintendent Bianchi has nearly 20 years in public land and natural resource management at the U.S. Forest Service. Previously, as District Ranger for Colorado's Dillon Ranger District in the White River National Forest, General Superintendent Bianchi oversaw 312,000 acres, including wilderness areas, reservoirs, 14 campgrounds and four renowned ski resorts. He led strategic planning to balance environmental protection with recreation, secured funding through creative partnerships, and helped guide policies for the broader 2.3 million-acre forest.

Since joining the Forest Service in 2008, General Superintendent Bianchi has served in California, Michigan, and Colorado. An Iowa State University graduate, his accolades include the 2022 U.S. Forest Service Chief Honor Award and the 2023 Forester's Ranger District of the Year.

"The Forest Preserves of Cook County are unique in this country—nowhere else can you find such ecological diversity woven into the fabric of a densely populated region," Bianchi said. "I want the Forest Preserves to lean even more deeply

into our mission to serve both land and people. The Forest Preserves are an important resource for each and every community we serve. But each community is different, and so is every preserve."

Friends was honored to be able to share thoughts with Forest Preserve Board President Toni Preckwinkle on what the new superintendent should bring to the table last November, as well as being able to participate in the interview process with Adam Bianchi earlier this year.



FPCC General Superintendent Adam Bianchi

Friends is encouraged to see that a strong conservationist, with a background in public land management, recreation, and programming that engages people and partners, was hired at this pivotal moment in the history of the FPCC.

"We will continue to prioritize restoring the ecological health of preserves using science as our guide and working with the Friends of the Forest Preserves and other critical collaborators."

- Adam Bianchi

"And we will expand how we connect with the diversity of places and people in Cook County, and be clear how we are relevant to all," Bianchi said. "Building on our partnerships, trying new approaches, finding creative and sustainable ways to bring in more resources—those will be the tasks ahead of us to reach those goals. We cannot do this work alone; the dedication of volunteers is fundamental to our success."

Friends is eager to continue our strong collaborative relationship with the Forest Preserves under Superintendent Bianchi's leadership.

Forest Preserve Experience celebrates 10th year

By Joy Bailey, Youth and Engagement Corps Manager

Empowering youth and restoring forest preserves is at the heart of Friends' Forest Preserve Experience program.

Ten years ago, the FPE program was launched with an ambitious vision: engage high school youth from Cook County in hands-on conservation, foster a lifelong appreciation for nature, and equip the next generation with essential job skills and leadership experience.

Now celebrating its tenth anniversary and counting more than 1,000 program participants since its inception, FPE is thriving.

The program is a collaborative effort coordinated by Friends and the Forest Preserves of Cook County, with robust support from partners such as the Cook County Bureau of Economic Development, the Housing Authority of Cook County, the Forest Preserve Foundation, and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

Designed for high school students ages 14 to 19 who reside in the south suburbs of Chicago and are HACC clients, FPE delivers a five-week summer experience filled with conservation projects, environmental education, and career readiness training. This year's program welcomed 91 students, 18 crew leaders, eight assistant crew leaders, and five program assistants.



The five-week summer program focuses on job skill development, restoration, education, and exposure to the forest preserves, and jobs in conservation.

The program's emphasis on inclusivity and mentorship has fostered a strong community of returning participants, some of whom now serve as leaders and program assistants themselves.

The heart of the FPE program lies in its conservation work.

In 2025, crews logged more than 4,100 hours of invasive species removal and site cleanup. Using tools such as bow saws and loppers, crews competed to clear buckthorn and honeysuckle from their assigned sites, with the crew at Plum Creek Meadow clearing more than their assigned area and winning a special prize at the FPE graduation ceremony.



"I like the clearing work," crew member Kanjreck C. said. "I feel like when we are done with it, it will be really clear and way prettier."

Collectively, the crews removed invasive plants from 1.74 acres across eight sites, dramatically improving habitat for native species and opening up scenic views for visitors. These hands-on activities not only benefited the preserves but also instilled a sense of accomplishment and teamwork in the young participants.

"This increased my interest in nature a hundred times," crew member Ivory B. said. "I've never been outside for this long."



Beyond the taxing physical work involved with invasive species removal, FPE invests heavily in environmental education. This year, participants logged 2,537 hours of learning, with lessons led by Friends' Calumet Engagement Corps Crew and the FPE senior program assistant. Topics ranged from invasive and native plant identification to climate change, recycling, and environmental justice. Field trips to the Museum of Science and Industry, Brookfield Zoo, Sand Ridge Nature Center, and canoeing trips with Friends of the Chicago River exposed youth to diverse ecosystems and careers in conservation.

A highlight for many was the environmental-justice-focused toxic tour with People for Community Recovery, deepening participants' understanding of the intersection between ecology and community health. Alumni events, such as the kayaking day at Beaubien Woods Boat Launch, further reinforced the program's commitment to community building and ongoing engagement.



"This experience most definitely increased my interest in nature and conservation work," crew member Tristen D. said. "Now I want to start doing my own walks in the forest."

FPE's career readiness curriculum, led by the FOTFP Associate Director of Human Resources Shirley Konwent covered workplace etiquette, goal setting, paychecks, resume writing, and mock interviews. Interactive and site-specific lessons proved most effective, helping participants gain practical skills and confidence for future employment.

"A job skill I learned is how to communicate," crew member Alonzo W. said. "I had a problem with stuttering, so this program helped me to talk more and to get over my fear."



Field trips and visits from FOTFP's adult Conservation Corps crews and FPCC's Resource Management crews introduced participants to conservation professionals and green career pathways. Survey data revealed that 82 percent of participants now want to continue their education in a green-related field, and 76 percent are interested in conservation careers—a testament to the program's lasting impact.

"Job skills that I learned that can help me in the future are communication, teamwork, and responsibility," crew member Brielle L said.



The FPE program fosters lifelong appreciation for nature through activities including walks in the Calumet region.

As the Forest Preserve Experience celebrates its tenth anniversary, it stands as a model for youth engagement, environmental stewardship, and workforce development. Through hard work, education, and a supportive community, FPE has transformed not only the landscapes of Cook County's preserves but also the lives of countless young people.

The next decade promises even greater impact—connecting youth to nature, each other, and a future of possibility in the world of conservation.

(Left) The FPE program aims to improve the health of the preserves through conservation projects while ensuring participants have an educational and productive summer.



FPE participants learn to use equipment like handsaws and loppers to remove invasive buckthorn.



Friends staff gathered at Penny Road Pond in Barrington last October.

2024 Annual Report

Excitement, success, and progress sum up 2024 for the Friends organization.

On the heels of our 25th anniversary celebrations in 2023 and the big forest preserve referendum win in 2022, Friends staff, partners, and supporters are riding an upward trajectory and have a lot to celebrate and take pride in.

Friends is thrilled to be awarded a significant multi-year grant from the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration in 2024. The grant was secured through a competitive application process and funds the Calumet Conservation Corps Crew and was one of the final funding pieces enabling us to move full speed ahead with a 2025 launch of the Engagement Corps. This new conservation corps model gives crew members the skills to lead educational and recreational programs for community members, while giving them essential job skills for any career.

Friends' Engagement Team organized and led events ranging from guided walks through our Trailblazers program to a series of Spring ephemeral hikes in the forest preserves, and the Wellness Tuesdays and Wednesdays series which feature yoga and stretch and walk activities. These events attracted thousands of participants over the course of the year.

The Engagement Team itself spent time dedicated to connecting with current and prospective partners who can shape and enhance our programs. One example was a thought-provoking day spent with staff at Trickster Cultural Center. The day with Trickster led staff to develop ideas on incorporating Indigenous teachings about the land into restoration and community building approaches and to explore how to give back to those whose teachings enlighten Friends' work.

Friends' most well known program, the Conservation Corps moved along as strong as ever. As designed at the program's 2007 start, Friends crews work year round to restore the forest preserves by removing invasive species, collecting and spreading native seed, and assisting with prescribed fire. The Conservation Corps crews attended a career-building conference led by FPCC and later in the year joined their colleagues at the Chicago Wilderness Congress gathering—complimenting their restoration work with valuable training and education opportunities that are central to their advancement as conservation professionals.

Friends is pleased that the crew members often continue their careers right here with positions at the Forest Preserves of Cook County, local park districts, ecological restoration contractors, and more.

Friends approved its 2025-2029 Strategic Plan in late 2024. Dozens of constructive meetings and workshops with representatives from all aspects of the organization's work informed the plan. At its heart, the plan reaffirms Friends' mission to unite people to protect, promote, and care for the forest preserves in Cook County. The strategic plan outlines the ambitions of the organization to add new programs and double down on a number of successful initiatives, including adding an all-volunteer Advocacy Corps, extending the Engagement Corps to additional regions, and adding a Des Plaines adult Conservation Corps.

The Forest Preserves of Cook County surpassed 70,000 acres of dedicated holdings with the purchase of a 68-acre plot along Deer Creek in December of 2024. The milestone achievement is just one of many positive developments aided by the 2022 referendum. Friends is thrilled for all the progress and worked with the Forest Preserves of Cook County to share details on how the incremental funds were expended and the positive impacts that are taking place.

Thank you for being a member of this community and for supporting Friends and the forest preserves.

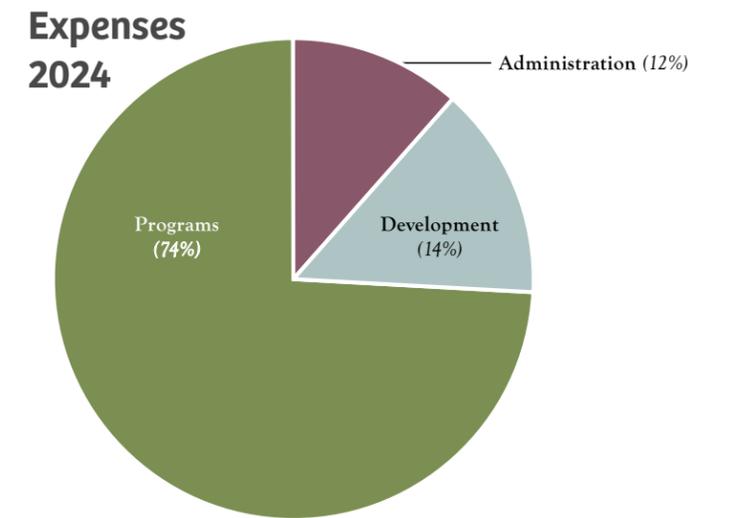
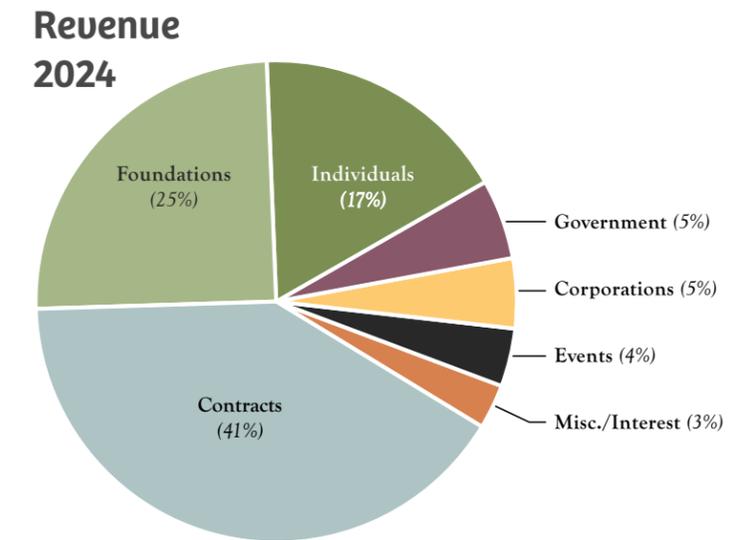


Friends' Engagement Team spent a thought-provoking day with staff at Trickster Cultural Center.

Revenue	2024	2023
Individuals	\$573,774	\$390,010
Foundations	\$820,295	\$2,148,620
Government	\$176,880	\$161,886
Contracts	\$1,347,981	\$1,441,975
Events	\$128,679	\$157,196
Corporations	\$155,000	\$105,081
Misc./Interest	\$98,626	\$33,392
TOTAL	\$3,301,235	\$4,438,160

Expenses	2024	2023
Programs	\$2,646,439	\$2,746,228
Administration	\$412,767	\$259,364
Development	\$511,552	\$373,417
TOTAL	\$3,570,758	\$3,379,009

Assets	2024	2023
Net Assets (beginning of year)	\$2,356,520	\$1,297,369
Net Assets (end of year)	\$2,086,997	\$2,356,520
Change in Net Assets	(\$269,523)	\$1,059,151



Woods walking program celebrates major milestone

The Trailblazers volunteer program has officially reached a major milestone, 100 guided walks. This incredible achievement reflects the dedication and passion of volunteers, who have brought communities together to explore the outdoors and connect with nature in meaningful ways.

Throughout the years, the walks have featured a diverse range of engaging themes, including insects, plants, birds, fitness, meditation, Earth Day celebrations, poetry, and much more. Volunteers are given creative control over when, where, and how the walks are executed. These walks have taken place at dozens of sites across the county, showcasing the variety of our natural and cultural green spaces.

This milestone is more than just a number, it's a testament to the enthusiasm of Friends Community volunteers and participants, and the growing impact of the Trailblazers program in promoting wellness, environmental education, appreciation for nature, and community outreach.

A huge thank you to everyone who has contributed to this success and here's to the next 100 walks.



Beck Lake (Glenview, IL) Trailblazer Walk

Corps member delivers excellent testimony

Cook County's Forest Preserve commissioners meet monthly to discuss business and each meeting allots time for the public to address the Cook County President and the commissioners.

Friends regularly uses that time to address the full board and go on the record about various initiatives.

In September Dione Goree, a member of Friends' Conservation Corps, spoke and his remarks are a spectacular snapshot of the impact our Conservation Corps program makes.

Dione's remarks are shared here as an inspiration and reinforcement of the great work that the Friends community is capable of doing.



Dione Goree, Friends Conservation Corps Crew Member

Good morning, Madame President and Commissioners.

My name is Dione Goree, and I'm here on behalf of Friends of the Forest Preserves. First, thank you for your continued support of our Conservation Corps.

Like many of our participants, I didn't begin my career in conservation. I worked in customer service and sales before realizing I wanted a path that was more hands-on and community-driven. Inspired by food justice, I joined internships with Evanston Grows and Windy City Harvest—and this year I founded Bellwood Farms, a Black-owned farm dedicated to food and education in my community.

Through this journey, I discovered the wonders of working in nature. You begin to understand the world around you more deeply—not just as green space, but as an ecosystem with stories to tell. I've found joy in something as simple as identifying plants on a walk, or teaching others how these species fit into our daily lives. This is the same kind of awareness the Conservation Corps builds for hundreds of young people across Cook County.

Impact and data

The Corps is more than job training. It's one of the best ways Cook County advances economic, equity, and environmental goals all at once.

In 2024, 40 participants—32 from Cook County—worked across nearly every commissioner district.

They collected 850 pounds of native seed and restored over 800 acres of land through invasive species removal.

Out of 15 members who left last year, 11 found conservation jobs or advanced their education—with the Forest Preserves, Openlands, and Chicago Botanic Garden, among the employers.

And this year, our Forest Preserve Experience summer program for teens welcomed 121 participants—the most ever.

Human stories

The numbers are strong, but the voices are even stronger.

Anthony shared: "This program taught me communication skills and prepared me for future jobs."

Ivory said: "I'd recommend this program to ten friends—so we can work, earn, and invest back into our community."

And Marquize summed it up: "If we don't help the earth, the earth's not going to help us."

Closing

Commissioners, your support makes all of this possible.

It transforms struggling land into thriving forests.

It transforms first jobs into careers.

And it transforms people's awareness of nature into stewardship that lasts a lifetime.

On behalf of Friends of the Forest Preserves—and as someone whose life has been changed by this work—thank you for investing in both the land and the people of Cook County.

Together, we will continue to thrive.

Benjamin Cox, Force of Nature winner

The Friends of the Forest Preserves Community is thrilled that our very own executive director, Benjamin Cox, was recognized among an elite group of conservation leaders in our region.

The Chicago Wilderness Alliance, a conservation collaborative that spans portions of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Wisconsin, recently honored 31 individuals, organizations, and projects across the region for their exceptional work, with their 2025 Force of Nature Awards and Excellence in Ecological Restoration Program Site Accreditations.

"Communities across the country are facing unprecedented challenges, so it's more important than ever to find hope and strength in collective action," says Elizabeth Kessler, chair of the Alliance and executive director of the McHenry County Conservation District. "The individuals and sites recognized this year remind us that optimism and collaboration remain powerful forces. Their work is not only inspiring—it's a blueprint for how we can continue to come together to protect what matters most and build a more resilient future."

Benjamin was unknowingly nominated by the Friends Staff who solicited letters of support from our partners and champions. The outpouring was overwhelming!

"I have had the privilege of working with Benjamin and the Friends of the Forest Preserves for the past 21 years when he joined the organization as President. I have consistently been impressed by his dedication and commitment to excellence," said Linda Masters, Fellow 2025 George B. Rabb Force of Nature Recipient and retired Restoration Specialist at Openlands.

"Friends would not have become the Force for Nature that it is without the leadership and steady hand at the helm of Benjamin Cox," said Debra Shore, a Friends Founding Board Member and former Environmental Protection Agency Region Five Administrator.

"I've not only witnessed my own knowledge grow exponentially but I've watched his influence change the lives of so many others," said Dyrell Williams, Friends Conservation Corps Alumni.

"Benjamin has been and continues to be a stalwart partner. He is committed to finding resolutions to the thorniest of problems and always has energy, vision, curiosity and interest in exploring new opportunities," said Michelle Uting, Director of External and Strategic Initiatives, Forest Preserves of Cook County.

2023 Force of Nature Award recipient, Friends' Conservation Core Associate Director Brenda Elmore wrote short remarks for the awards presentation which were shared by Friends Program Director Radhika Miraglia as she presented the award to Benjamin.

"You've always been the top advocate for diversity not just in your talk but actually in your walk! Because of your leadership we are a family at Friends," Brenda said.

The George B. Rabb Force of Nature Awards are given every two years. The awards are named in honor of the late, longtime director of the Chicago Zoological Society and Brookfield Zoo, who was a tireless leader in international conservation and a central force in the establishment of the Chicago Wilderness Alliance. Force of Nature awardees are recognized by their peers for rising to meet the moment with bold ideas, creative solutions, and meaningful collaboration. Their efforts—large or small—create ripples of positive change for nature and for communities, proving that one person or one project can make a difference that reaches far beyond expectations.

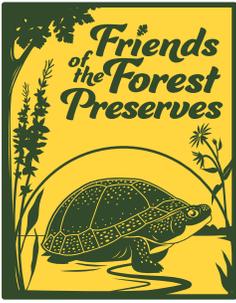
"I could not be more thrilled to be honored with this award," Benjamin said. "It is truly special to be given this award by such an incredible community of conservationists in this amazing region. Thank you to everyone that makes the Friends community so incredible and impactful."

"Friends would not have become the Force for Nature that it is without the leadership and steady hand at the helm of Benjamin Cox."

- Debra Shore

Benjamin Cox, Friends Executive Director, is presented with a Chicago Wilderness Force of Nature award by Radhika Miraglia, Friends Program Director. Benjamin is honored that staff nominated him for this prestigious award.





Friends of the Forest Preserves
411 S. Wells Street, Suite 800
Chicago, IL 60607

Friends of the Forest Preserves unites people to protect, promote, and care for the forest preserves in Cook County. Thanks to your ongoing support we are collectively upholding our shared responsibility to carry on the legacy of healthy natural areas for future generations. Please consider making a donation today by visiting fotfp.org, scanning the QR code, or mailing a check to the address above. Thank you!



Printed with vegetable ink on recycled paper with 10% post-consumer content manufactured using renewable biogas energy.



Connect with Friends!

-  fotfp.org
-  [@forestpreserves](https://www.facebook.com/forestpreserves)
-  [@fotfp](https://www.instagram.com/fotfp)
-  [@forestpreserves](https://www.youtube.com/forestpreserves)
-  Friends of the Forest Preserves

"Fungus on Dead Wood", Schiller Woods, Chicago by Andrea Baldi