Congratulations to Our 2020 Freshwater Heroes Award Winners
Going Above and Beyond to Protect Our Water Resources

As you know, working to protect and restore our precious waters—drinking water, lakes, rivers, wetlands, and shorelines—is HARD work. But it is also very rewarding. This edition of Freshwater Heroes is about highlighting and celebrating the work of everyday people jumping into action to solve some of the most pressing water issues across the Great Lakes region. These individuals and organizations represent a dedicated group of water protectors.

Many groups and individuals receiving our Hero Awards had significant victories in their work to protect water resources in 2020. Others are being applauded for the many years of ongoing efforts. Freshwater Heroes never give up on doing what’s right for our waters and communities.

In every community around the Great Lakes, you’ll find thoughtful, committed residents taking action to protect our lakes, rivers, streams, wetlands, shorelines, and drinking water. Small, individual actions can make a big difference, and at Freshwater Future, we’re inspired by those who devote so much of their time to making things better for their communities and all of us.

These heroes provide seemingly unlimited energy and passion for their causes without asking for recognition, because it is in their hearts and it is the right thing to do. We salute these Freshwater Future Heroes and all of the thousands of citizens taking time from their busy lives to make the Great Lakes and our communities better places for each of us.
CORRINE ARMISTEAD
Earth Economics

Corrine Armistead is the former GIS Manager for Earth Economics. In 2018, Corrine and her colleagues worked with Freshwater Future to adapt a phone app that residents can use to document flooding and stormwater problems due to rain or snow events. Collecting and mapping this data provides information that residents can use to advocate for stormwater management and green infrastructure needs to address flooding. When COVID-19 hit last spring, the urgency around flooding shifted to water shutoffs. We learned from our community partners in cities like Chicago, Detroit, Toledo, Flint, and Benton Harbor that city municipalities could not identify which homes had water shut-offs and still needed to be restored. Enter, Corrine.

Corrine lent her time and expertise to help adapt the stormwater app for identifying families living without water. She mentored and worked closely with Freshwater Future’s staff to document the innovative stormwater app to document and map homes in need of water restoration. Already, this tool has led to Freshwater Future identifying 50-plus families living without water in southside Chicago and will be used to help additional communities throughout the region. Thanks, Corrine for helping get water turned back on during the pandemic.

JEFF WHITELOW
Bright Neighborhood Community Development

Jeff Whitelow has been known for his profound ability to walk in the shoes of those in the most vulnerable communities and help bring vital information to those who need it most. Taking a vow of poverty to personally assess the life of those most vulnerable in Chicago, enabled him to identify that water shutoffs from unaffordable rates and lead exposure are serious problems. Jeff has championed the search for residents eligible for the new drinking water Utility Billing Relief (UBR) program in Chicago and assists them in enrolling into the program that forgives 100% of residents debts after one year of consistent payment.

Jeff is dedicated to expanding the group’s reach to replicate his efforts and partners throughout the most impoverished communities in Chicago with the goal to further aid those in need and ensure public health for all Chicagoans. Thank you, Jeff for your devotion to helping others selflessly.

KAREN REINBOLD
Freshwater Future Board

Karen Reinbold has served as the Treasurer on Freshwater Future’s Board of Directors for six years.

Karen embraces her role to provide review and oversight, greatly benefiting Freshwater Future. She encourages discussion, welcomes brainstorming of problems and issues, and is always looking for better, more efficient ways to produce financial information. Staff greatly appreciate her friendly, “let’s do this” attitude and her genuine interest in helping with anything we throw at her. Karen is incredibly generous with her time, and she always finds a way to share a smile and some laughter with others.

Karen’s experience may be in numbers, but she is committed to protecting water resources. She helped a grassroots neighborhood group to oppose a private easement on a popular public park/golf course that would have allowed a paved road to destroy wetlands. Karen created a petition gathering about a hundred signatures submitted to the Metro Water Reclamation District in opposition to the easement. Although the easement was approved, advocacy efforts raised public awareness and appreciation of the resource generating hope that the road will not be built in the future. Thank you Karen for your leadership and dedication to Freshwater Future.
When kids in Flint, Michigan needed a place for recreation and learning, Mike Harris and partners went out and bought a school that was no longer being used and turned it into the Flint Development Center. Now kids and families on the north end of Flint have a place to call their own with a gym, learning library, and an array of programs.

When everyone in Flint needed safe drinking water, Mike again stepped up with partners and developed the Flint Community Lab. In fact, the Flint Community Lab is named in memory of McKenzie Patrice Croom, granddaughter of Mike Harris. McKenzie was born with seizures that were complicated by her exposure to Flint’s drinking water. Now families in Flint can have their residential water tested for free to know whether they can trust the water, or if needed, make changes in the home to make the water safe to drink. Mike Harris, we thank you and all of your many partners for your vision, ability to get things done, and willingness to take the time to listen to needs and help find solutions.

Solving problems by connecting people with chemistry are Jerry Holycross’ strengths. Without Jerry’s assistance, the Flint Community Lab might still be a pipedream. When Freshwater Future and our partners approached Jerry with an idea to help Flint residents test their own water for lead, Jerry’s enthusiasm and willingness to immediately get involved moved the BIG idea forward. As a longtime Michigan resident, the Flint Water Crisis hit close to home. Jerry quickly saw how technological innovations empowering the community at the grassroots level could help equitably address drinking water issues.

Jerry opened doors to Thermo Fisher Scientific for equipment donations and the expertise needed to plan, build, and open the Flint Community Lab. More importantly, he helped build a strong relationship between his employer, Thermo Fisher Scientific, and the partners in the Flint Community Lab that continues to flourish. His generosity and advocacy have empowered an entire community with free access to the finest scientific technology. Thank you, Jerry, for sharing your time and expertise to benefit all Flint residents.

Thanks to Tim Veverica for assisting with this tribute.
When Concerned Citizens of Butler and Beyond learned that a composting facility was to be built in Butler County, New York, the group quickly organized to stop the facility project that would be accepting 350 tons of sewage sludge from New York City and surrounding boroughs daily. The group undertook a massive public outreach campaign to inform local and state representatives and surrounding communities of the dangers Wolcott Creek and Lake Ontario would face if the project was given the green light to proceed.

As a result of Concerned Citizens of Butler and Beyond’s organizing work, the group received notice in July, 2020 that they successfully stopped the proposed “Butler Composting Facility” from moving forward. This closure will protect public health, the environment, and the local economy. Thank you to the Concerned Citizens of Butler and Beyond for their dedicated work to protect Lake Ontario and people’s drinking water.

**Need Our Water (NOW)**

Back in 2010, the “forever chemical” PFAS was detected at the former Wurtsmith Air Force Base located in Oscoda, Michigan, contaminating residential drinking water wells as well as area surface water and shorelines. While numerous studies and investigations had been conducted, it took the help of the community-driven group Need Our Water (NOW), organized in 2017, to push for action on a long-term cleanup plan.

NOW continues to advocate and hold government agencies accountable. By becoming a voice for the Oscoda community and organizing with other groups who share their concerns, this group has created a strong movement that has captured the attention of decision-makers and is working with Michigan’s congressional delegation to press for quicker action and funding. We commend NOW’s continued diligent efforts to bring a spotlight to PFAS issues at the local, state, and national levels. This group ensures that the community knows what’s happening and clean-up actions move forward.

**Hold Erie Coke Accountable**

Hold Erie Coke Accountable, a group of local residents in Erie, Pennsylvania, recently worked to ensure that the Erie Coke Plant would be brought into compliance with environmental requirements during a permit renewal process. The plant had a history of environmental violations, and the company and the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) were in a legal battle when the DEP announced it would not renew the plant’s operating permit.

With growing pressure from regulatory agencies, the local wastewater treatment plant and residents, Erie Coke abruptly ended its operations in December 2020. This closure will protect public health and the environment from polluted air and water emissions. The group, however, understands the closure also brings job losses and leaves a site cleanup that may have to be led by the state. Hold Erie Accountable is prepared to work to solve these issues. We applaud the residents of Hold Erie Coke Accountable for their hard work to bring public health issues to the surface and now their continuing work to ensure proper site cleanup and encouraging job creation.

**Toledo Water Council**

The Toledo Water Council, with support from Freshwater Future staff, organized by committed community members to address water access and security with a focus on equity and justice. The council has taken on issues surrounding the regionalization of Toledo’s utilities, harmful algal blooms, lead contamination, and water affordability. Even during the coronavirus outbreak, the residents’ commitment to securing wa-
Nestle recently requested an increase in their pumping from wells near Mecosta, Michigan where they bottle water for sale. The request to increase pumping from 150 to 400 gallons per minute at one well was contested by Michigan Citizens for Water Conservation (MCWC), and after nearly two years of expenses and work, MCWC has been told they never had jurisdiction. As a result, the group has filed an appeal in court regarding the water increase to prevent impacts to a nearby river and wetland. This isn’t the first court battle for the group, having spent 10 years previously battling the initial Nestle water bottling facility. Taking an international corporation to court is expensive and exhausting. For more than 20-years, MCWC’s volunteers have increased awareness of the impacts of water withdrawals, and taken legal action to achieve change. Our heartfelt thanks go out to MCWC for all of their dedication to protecting our water resources and being willing to stand in for our water resources in court.

Mining 150 feet from the Menominee River, which flows directly into Lake Michigan and was recently cleaned up from legacy pollution, never seemed like a good idea to many that depend on and appreciate the quality of the river. The Back Forty project proposes to excavate an 84 acre open pit sulfide mine, 800 foot deep, 150 feet from the banks of the Menominee River. A number of groups, including Front Forty Environmental Fight (Freshwater Hero in 2016), Coalition to SAVE the Menominee River, and Mining Action Group have been fighting from both Wisconsin and Michigan, where both states border the river. Thanks to years of effort, the wetland destruction permit for the mine was denied through a contested case. We applaud all those who worked so diligently to ensure the mine can’t harm the Menominee River, Lake Michigan and the surrounding area.

Our heartfelt thanks go out to MCWC for all of their dedication to protecting our water resources and being willing to stand in for our water resources in court.
Memorials

DAVID SPANGLER
Lake Erie Charter Boat Captain

Freshwater Future honors Dave Spangler who sadly passed away in October 2020. Dave was the Vice President of the Lake Erie Charter Boat Association, and long-time advocate for Lake Erie. Dave dedicated over a decade to his passion—charter boat fishing and Lake Erie.

When he was not running a charter, he was educating the media, decision-makers, and the public on Lake Erie and harmful algal blooms. He was known to bring a little glass jar of algae with him to meetings to ensure people could connect to the algae plaguing the lake he loved so much. Whether taking a 5am call before running a charter, driving to Columbus to testify on a bill about Lake Erie, or water sampling to ensure the state had data on the health of the Lake, there was no questioning Dave’s love for Lake Erie.

Dave’s legacy will continue to live on in the hearts of so many including ours at Freshwater Future, as well as his work through the numerous people he inspired to care so deeply about a Lake he loved.

MICHELE WHEELER
Bad River Wisconsin

Lake Superior champion and clean water advocate, Michele Wheeler, passed in June 2020, after a nine-year battle with cancer. Freshwater Future witnessed Michele’s leadership in her role as the first Executive Director for the Bad River Watershed Association (now known as the Superior Watersheds Association). Under her guidance, the organization continued important water quality monitoring and culvert restoration work in the watershed. Michele also lifted the organization’s voice during a controversial mining project proposed at the headwaters of the Bad River.

Michele’s passion for taking care of clean water, in particular Lake Superior and its watershed, revolved around relationship building with a broad diversity of people and organizations while being firmly rooted in good science. Michele was a skilled communicator who engaged people with her sharp wit, compassion, and innate ability to see situations from others perspectives. Michele’s many contributions to the Lake Superior watershed, and the people and communities she’s served, will be felt for years to come.

Thanks to Valerie Damstra for assistance writing this tribute.

Volunteer Extraordinaire

NANCY STALEY

While Nancy already received a Freshwater Future Hero award in 2015, we believe she deserves another moment of recognition for her long-time efforts of volunteering above and beyond. If you’ve received a newsletter or communications in the mail from Freshwater Future, chances are that Nancy Staley’s helping hands worked on getting that information to you. She’s been volunteering with Freshwater Future since 2014, and Nancy has faithfully continued helping us even during the COVID-19 pandemic by working on mailings in her home and going the extra mile to safely meet staff. Nancy is so good at what she does that not only do we count on her to send out mailings efficiently, we rely on her expert advice since she also volunteers countless hours with many other nonprofit organizations in northern Michigan. Nancy is both a catalyst and anchor for our work. Nancy’s vibrant attitude is infectious and her many talents are so appreciated including sewing masks for staff and baking treats.

Thank you Nancy and to all of our volunteers who work behind the scenes making sure that our waters are protected. We couldn’t do this critical work without you.
Thank You to All of Our Donors from November 1, 2020 through February 15, 2021

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Give the Gift of Helping to Ensure the Healthy Future of Our Great Lakes Waters! Consider making a donation in honor of family and friends to Freshwater Future. The recipient will receive a greeting card with acknowledgement.
The work of protecting or improving our drinking water, rivers, lakes, wetlands, shorelines, and groundwater in the Great Lakes region depends on involved community members like you. Are you working to ensure access to safe, affordable drinking water or protecting a water source? If so, check-out Freshwater Future’s 2021 grant opportunities guidelines to see if your organization is eligible. The deadline for Project Grants is March 31, 2021. Visit our website for additional information: freshwaterfuture.org/grants.