

FRESHWATER VOICES

FRESHWATER™
FUTURE

2025 ISSUE 1

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Inspiring
Freshwater Heroes
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HONORING FRESHWATER HEROES Inspiration in Challenging Times



Each year, our Freshwater Hero Awards recognize individuals and organizations who step up to protect the Great Lakes and the communities that depend on them. These remarkable people remind us that even in the face of challenges, meaningful change is possible.

These heroes have dedicated years—some even decades—to protecting our waterways and ensuring safe drinking water. They fought against pressing issues such as water privatization, industrial pollution, toxic contamination, and threats from factory farms while uniting communities and inspiring action. No matter their approach, they all share a common trait: the courage to step up when it matters most.

At a time when the news can make the world seem overwhelming, our Freshwater Heroes remind us that change happens because people care enough to stand up and make a difference. Their stories inspire hope and action, showing that small steps lead to big change.

We are honored to recognize these individuals and organizations for their tireless efforts. We hope their stories inspire you to get involved, take action, and help protect the waters that sustain us all. Because when people come together with a shared purpose, the possibilities for a healthier future are endless.



WATCH THE HERO EVENT RECORDING!



Scan the QR code or go to:
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ADVOCATES TURN PASSION INTO WATER PROTECTION!

JAMIE CROSS



Jamie Cross has spent her life's work to protect and preserve the Great Lakes. Based in Muskegon, Michigan, Jamie's love for the outdoors including fishing, camping, and exploring trails inspired her dedication to protecting public access to the Lake Michigan shoreline from overdevelopment.

When plans surfaced to build a road through a local dune property, Jamie joined a local effort to stop it, ultimately helping advocates purchase the land to expand public park space.

This early activism launched her nearly 20-year career with the Alliance for the Great Lakes, where she founded the Adopt-a-Beach program, fought for Great Lakes protections in Washington, D.C., and developed long term action plans to ensure clean water access for all. For the last 3.5 years, Jamie has been involved in public access and development issues along Muskegon Lake and started Walk ON! Muskegon to promote public access along the lakefront. She believes that connecting people to water is essential to protecting it, helping to ensure that water remains a shared, public resource.

Whether she's working with community members, city leaders, or local organizations, Jamie continues to be a local watchdog for Muskegon Lake. Her story is a reminder of the power of grassroots action and lifelong dedication to our waters.

JOANIE MCGUFFIN



Joanie McGuffin's passion for the Great Lakes was sparked early by her parents' environmental activism against harmful pesticides and herbicides. Growing up surrounded by freshwater, she developed a deep appreciation for nature and a commitment to protecting it.

Her love for conservation grew through a life of adventure: paddling thousands of miles, sharing stories through writing and photography, and inspiring others to connect with the natural world. This journey led her to the Lake Superior Watershed Conservancy, where she helped integrate watershed protection with land conservation.

One of Joanie's proudest achievements is Lake Superior Watershed Conservancy's Canoes for Conservation, a program that fosters a deeper connection to water. Through guided big canoe tours on the St. Marys River, participants gain a firsthand understanding of the Great Lakes' cultural, environmental, and economic significance. Canoes for Conservation has had a positive impact on people's relationship with water and growing the organization's Indigenous partnerships.

She firmly believes water protection begins at home, in everyday moments like turning on the tap and recognizing our connection to this precious resource. Thank you, Joanie, for your dedication to protecting and honoring our Great Lakes!

VEL SCOTT

Vel Scott has made it her mission to help improve public health in her community. After learning how to prepare heart-healthy soul food to help reverse her husband's heart disease, Vel became passionate about teaching her community in Cleveland's Fairfax neighborhood healthy cooking and nutrition. But she didn't stop there. In 2008, recognizing the need for access to high-quality, local produce, she created a community-based urban farm, Vel's Purple Oasis.



Over the years, the farm has blossomed into a hub for education, collaboration, and empowerment. Every year something new is added to the Oasis, such as hoop houses, green stormwater features, or flower gardens. An impactful educator, Vel teaches how to prepare healthy meals from foods not only from the garden, but from local food banks. Vel's passion is magnetic, attracting community members who volunteer at the Oasis to help grow healthful food and be a part of an effort to create a healthier community in the heart of the city.

Today, the Purple Oasis is a peaceful gathering space where people can enjoy fresh meals while learning how to grow their own food. Vel's leadership, vision, and commitment to her community have made the Purple Oasis a cornerstone of health and well-being.



KOFI OSEI

Kofi Osei's journey into local advocacy began with a passion for biking and efforts to improve bike trails in Towamencin, Pennsylvania. However, his focus quickly shifted when he learned of the township's proposal to sell the local sewer system. Concerned about the potential consequences—including rising water rates and loss of public control—he became a leader in the fight against water privatization.

In 2021, Osei co-founded the Towamencin chapter of Neighbors Opposing Privatization (NOPE) and helped drive a grassroots movement that led to a historic change. They successfully fought to rewrite the Towamencin Charter to ban the privatization of water, wastewater, and stormwater services. This victory not only prevented the sale of the sewer system, but also ensured long-term protections for the community's water infrastructure.

Encouraged by supporters of the movement, Osei ran for Township Supervisor and was elected. His leadership has sparked greater civic engagement, with more residents attending local meetings and participating in decision-making processes. Looking ahead, Osei and NOPE continue advocating for stronger state laws to prevent water privatization across Pennsylvania. His work stands as a powerful example of how local action can protect public resources and ensure a more just and sustainable future for all.

DEBRA NOEL and the Clean Water Action Council of Northeast Wisconsin



Debra Noel, now retired, dedicates her time to safeguarding local waterways in Northeast Wisconsin, especially Casco Creek in Kewaunee County. Debra uses her skills to monitor water quality and advocate for clean water. With support from the Clean Water Action Council, Debra Noel spearheaded efforts with Water Action Volunteers (WAV) to monitor Casco Creek which has been impacted by a nearby Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation (CAFO).

The CAFO settled a lawsuit with nearby residents over groundwater contamination, agreeing to halt liquid manure spreading after four years to give time to build a biodigester. The biodigester is expected to discharge 400,000 gallons daily into Casco Creek. To protect the creek, Debra and WAV volunteers expanded baseline monitoring to gather critical data before the biodigester starts discharging into the creek. With support from Clean Water Action Council, they track nutrient levels and other factors that may affect the creek's health. The data collected is entered into the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources' Surface Water Integrated Monitoring Systems, ensuring it is official and can help protect drinking and surface water. Debra's commitment to preserving Casco Creek and her proactive monitoring efforts serve as a model for other communities facing similar environmental challenges.

STEPHANIE SMITH



Stephanie is a global water strategist, facilitator, and educator advancing solutions at the intersection of water, climate change, gender, youth and justice. After 17 years working on the North American Great Lakes, she is a global consultant, catalyzing international collaborations for the health of people and waterways. She founded Water Solutionaries and AquaVox, connecting youth from the North American and African Great Lakes.

As Strategic Advisor for the African Center for Aquatic Research and Education, Stephanie co-leads the African Women in Science program and contributes to advisory groups for the seven African Great Lakes. She also works with the International Lake Environment Committee and Living Lakes Network. She has devoted her career to ensuring clean, accessible, and affordable water, while cultivating a vibrant network of international freshwater leaders. Stephanie served as Freshwater Future's Board Chair for six years. We are grateful for her leadership, advocacy, and support and making a lasting impact on protecting our water resources.

ROB LETSCHER

Rob Letscher is a professor and marine biogeochemist at the University of New Hampshire. His research focus on understanding how the ocean's biology and chemistry influence global climate and predicting how climate change will affect marine ecosystems. Rob also has a deep commitment to the health of the Great Lakes, spending his summers along the shores of Little Traverse Bay near Petoskey, Michigan. He is contributing his expertise and resources to study the bay's annual nutrient levels, helping to deepen our understanding of its ecosystem.



For six years, Rob served as a Freshwater Future board member and Secretary of the Board, bringing a vital scientific perspective to our work. He helped center data as a critical tool in our efforts and was always ready to step up and lead wherever needed. We are deeply grateful for his service and expertise. Thank you, Rob, for all you have done to protect the freshwater of the Great Lakes and the oceans of our planet!

ORGANIZATIONS DRIVING CHANGE IN THEIR COMMUNITIES

BRIDGES//PUENTES: JUSTICE COLLECTIVE OF THE SOUTHEAST



Bridges//Puentes Justice Collective was founded in 2020 by four passionate citizens determined to confront racial disparities and injustices in southeast Chicago. Their work initially focused on addressing systemic inequities in the community, but it soon expanded into water justice after several of the founding members were exposed to lead in drinking water.

Recognizing the public health risks posed by lead service lines, the collective launched educational campaigns to inform the community about the dangers of lead exposure. They canvassed neighborhoods, shared valuable resources, and collaborated with the city to distribute water filters. Through their tireless efforts, the organization successfully signed up over 1,000 families for water filters, ensuring they had access to clean drinking water and helping to protect their families' health.

Today, the collective continues to advocate for faster action on replacing lead pipes in southeast Chicago, where the threat to public health remains high. Thank you to Bridges//Puentes Justice Collective for their dedication to meeting the needs of their neighborhood and building a network of support and solidarity to address the legacy of inequalities in their community.



PROTECT THE PORKIES



Every year, over half a million visitors flock to Porcupine Mountains State Park in Michigan's Upper Peninsula to experience its breathtaking Lake Superior coastline and old-growth forests. But this natural wonder is under threat. In 2023, Tom Grotewohl, a former park employee, launched the group Protect the Porkies after learning about a proposed copper mine near the park, which could have devastating effects on the local waters and environment.

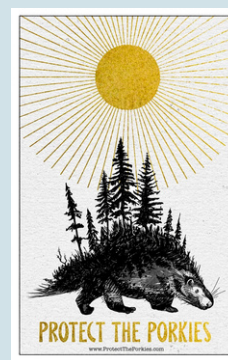
The proposed mine would be the closest metallic sulfide mine to Lake Superior in history. The plan includes rerouting streams, destroying wetlands, and constructing a massive tailings dam near the park, potentially contaminating the lake with toxic mine waste. In response, Protect the Porkies organized a massive campaign to raise awareness, built a social media following of over 40,000, and rallied 13,000+ people to speak out against a proposed \$50 million state grant to the mining company.

But the fight is far from over. The county has recently revived efforts for the state grant to the company, and Protect the Porkies continues to rally for the protection of this pristine ecosystem. With plans to mine beneath the Porcupine Mountains, this battle is about more than just copper; it's about preserving the heritage, biodiversity, and beauty of one of the Great Lakes region's most treasured natural areas.

**Inspiring
Artwork!**
Protect the Porkies
Poster Contest
Winners



Karla Sanders



Travis Even

TIMBER



TIMBER, a community-based advocacy group in Troy, New York, has quickly become a reliable and influential voice for residents since its founding in 2022. Dedicated to strengthening community engagement with local and state governments, TIMBER ensures that the concerns of under-served and under-resourced neighborhoods are heard and addressed.

One of TIMBER's most significant achievements has been its campaign for lead service line replacement to improve drinking water quality. The group played a crucial role in exposing delays in city-led efforts to replace lead service lines, pressuring the City of Troy to cover the cost of private-side replacements, and securing the distribution of water filters to affected residents. As a result of their relentless advocacy, TIMBER helped secure significant public funds for lead service line replacements, moving Troy closer to a lead-free future.

TIMBER focuses on trust-building within Troy's fractured communities, working to increase civic engagement and highlight community concerns no matter how big or small. By keeping steady pressure on key issues and holding city officials accountable, TIMBER remains a powerful force for justice.

GARD



In 2021, Gary Advocates for Responsible Development (GARD) formed to take a stand against environmental injustices in their Gary, Indiana community. When a proposed bioenergy project threatened to burn garbage for fuel—raising serious health concerns for residents already burdened by decades of air and water pollution—GARD sprang into action. Through petitions, lawsuits, and persistent advocacy, they made their voices heard. Three years later, the bioenergy project is no longer a threat, and the company behind it has folded.

But GARD's work isn't over. The organization remains committed to a cleaner, healthier future for Gary. They are actively engaging residents in shaping a vision for a more sustainable city—one where the Lake Michigan shoreline is accessible to all and where steel plants use cleaner, less polluting practices.



GARD's dedication proves that community-led advocacy can create real change. Their work is making Gary and Northwest Indiana safer, more sustainable places to live, and we are grateful for their leadership in the fight for environmental justice.



"Freshwater Heroes remind us that change happens because people care enough to stand up and make a difference."

ST. LOUIS RIVER ALLIANCE



The St. Louis River Alliance (SLRA) headquartered in Duluth, Minnesota started in the late 1980s as a Citizen Advisory Committee (CAC) to help Minnesota and Wisconsin agencies create a cleanup plan for the St. Louis River. The river was severely polluted by industry and designated a toxic hot spot or Area of Concern (AOC). As a CAC, they provided citizen's input into the process. In 2017 the SLRA led the effort to get a bonding bill passed that triggered over \$70 million for cleanup projects in the Estuary. Their long-term commitment and efforts have led to a cleaner, safer river, culminating in the St. Louis River's National Water Trail designation in 2020.

Operating as a nonprofit since 1996, SLRA does more than help guide river restoration. They are committed to helping connect people in historically neglected river-front neighborhoods and the greater community. By creating welcoming spaces for conversation, SLRA listens and learns from residents to provide an incredible variety of programs and events based on input from local voices. As a result, residents of Duluth, MN and Superior, WI are reconnecting to these incredible waterways—St. Louis River, Estuary and Lake Superior – and those experiences can have a positive impact in their lives. Thank you to SLRA for ensuring the river remains healthy and accessible for both people and wildlife for generations to come.



FIND MORE INSPIRING STORIES FROM PAST AWARD WINNERS!

Since launching our annual awards in 2004 to honor grassroots heroes, Freshwater Future has had the privilege and honor of recognizing hundreds of inspiring individuals and organizations.

Scan the QR code or go to: freshwaterfuture.org/hero-award-recipient



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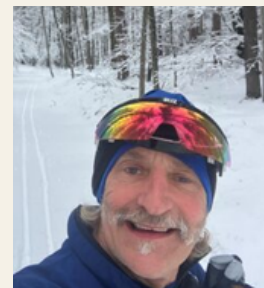


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WELCOME NEW BOARD MEMBERS

RANDY SMITH

Randy Smith's commitment to a clean freshwater future and water management began at Michigan State University and led to a 20-year career in residuals management where he closed open dumps, started recycling programs, organized household hazardous waste collection events, and led groups and committees focused on environmental protection and sustainability. Since 2005, Randy has combined his experience in regional planning, community development, residuals management, and renewable energy into a private practice serving clients from county governments, individuals and utility companies.



JACLYN WEGNER

Jaclyn Wegner is the senior director of conservation action at Shedd Aquarium in Chicago where she mobilizes individuals, communities, and businesses to take action for animals and communities through restoring local wetlands and rivers, sourcing sustainably-sourced seafood, and tackling the plastic pollution crisis. Jaclyn has led conservation outreach efforts at the aquarium since 2014 and has worked on environmental programming since 2006. She has a bachelor's degree in biology and a master's degree in education.



This year's All About Water Convening in Rochester, New York was transformative! If you attended in-person or virtually, we appreciate the time you took to learn about and discuss pressing issues facing our waters and communities in the Great Lakes region. Thank you to our Steering Committee and presenters for making this year's event a success.



L-R: Jill Singer and Alexis Smith



L-R: Jannan Cornstalk, Indygo Hawk, Sofia Johansson, and Sophie Staufer



L-R: Maria Maybee and Jill Ryan

Convening Recording and Resources Available Online!

If you weren't able to join us or want to revisit some of the sessions, you can access the recordings and session materials online. We will continue to add more materials to our website, so check back for additional information!



Scan the QR code or go to:
[freshwaterfuture.org/
all-about-water](https://freshwaterfuture.org/all-about-water)



L-R: Sally Howard, Anna Bunting, Alexis Smith, Jeff Whitelow: Back: Greg Campbell - Cohen visit Lake Ontario.

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Capital Area Friends of the Environment
Coalition to Save the Menominee River
Concerned Citizens of Big Bay
Elk Skegemog Lakes Association
Friends of Rice Creek
Friends of the North Pikes Creek Wetlands
Friends of the St. Clair River
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Williams County Alliance (Ohio)
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- The Weekly Update with news and happenings from across the Great Lakes region
- Occasional emails on topics to help you take action, alert you to events, update you on our work and provide opportunities for funding and support.

STAY INFORMED. STAY CONNECTED. TAKE ACTION.

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