

FRESHWATER VOICES

SPRING 2026



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Inspiring
Freshwater Heroes

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2025 FRESHWATER HEROES



Freshwater Future is excited to celebrate the hard work of people and groups who are bringing awareness and action to the Great Lakes region. Our 2025 Freshwater Heroes show amazing reverence for our environment and are committed to protecting our precious water and communities.

Our heroes live in every corner of the Great Lakes region, but share a similar commitment to protect our waters--the lakes, rivers, streams, wetlands, shorelines, and drinking water that are crucial for our region's health and vitality. They work through community efforts, advocacy, and policy reforms to tackle the biggest water issues with determination and creativity.

This year, we are proud to honor ten outstanding individuals and community groups who have worked hard to create real, lasting change. These champions have spent years addressing the complex problems affecting our water resources, from improving water quality to preventing pollution and dealing with climate impacts.

As we share the stories of these Freshwater Heroes in this *Voices* edition, we are reminded that small actions can make a huge difference. At Freshwater Future, we are inspired by those who give their time and skills to improve the Great Lakes and our communities.

Join us in honoring these Freshwater Heroes. Let their stories inspire you to take action in your community!

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ADVOCATES TURN PASSION INTO WATER PROTECTION

LaTanya Bell MICHIGAN



LaTanya Bell has dedicated much of her adult life to confronting social injustices that place her community at risk, particularly those tied to the fundamental human right to water. Her advocacy for reproductive rights is deeply connected to the need for safe, clean, and affordable water as a critical factor in advancing Black maternal health and equity. Access to affordable, safe water is also essential to housing stability, enabling basic daily needs such as hygiene, cooking, laundry, and drinking, and transforming a house into a sustainable home. Beyond advocacy, LaTanya's impact is strengthened by her ability to build and grow organizations that drive meaningful change. She founded Smart Girls Empowered to promote art as a pathway to entrepreneurship for Black girls. She also brings her leadership, relationships, knowledge, and deep commitment to community to her work with Wisdom Institute, as Co-Executive Director, helping to expand its reach and impact.

Creativity is central to LaTanya's approach and plays a vital role in the success of the justice work she champions. Whether through art and healing practices, developing innovative communications tools, or introducing community-centered ideas, she ensures that the voices and leadership of the community remain at the forefront. Thank you, LaTanya, for being a Freshwater Hero and for all you have done to improve health and water access.

Sherry Fleming's deep respect and passion for nature contributed to her being a lifelong advocate for water. Her concerns about threats to the drinking water source in her community, the Michindoh aquifer and for Lake Erie, were the triggers for getting involved.

In 2006, Sherry co-founded the Williams County Alliance in Northwest Ohio to prevent impacts from a large factory farm. Sherry's organizing skills led to other successes such as stopping a proposed fish farm that would have pulled five million gallons a day from the aquifer and the discharge of the same amount of wastewater to the St. Joseph River.

Sherry's advocacy extends beyond Northwest Ohio, through collaborations with various groups and advocates in the Great Lakes region. Her extensive experience and caring are now leading her to work for the rights of nature to ensure future generations can experience the benefit of clean water and abundant nature.

In Sherry's own words, "Laws must be changed to respect and acknowledge the interconnectedness of all nature." An effective leader, Sherry models how we can work in our community and throughout the region to protect our waters.

Sherry Fleming OHIO



For Sally Howard, her time experiencing Lake Erie, the Niagara River, and Lake Ontario and the early encouragement of her parents and teachers have honed her desire and abilities to ensure the future of water and the environment. One thing Sally has stressed is that decisions need to be made to benefit future generations, finding inspiration from Indigenous peoples' values of caring for the land and water and thinking forward seven generations.

Sally has worked for decades with others to protect water and the environment, from helping to secure an indefinite hydrofracking moratorium for New York state, to founding local organic Community Supported Agriculture. Her success has been created through tenacity, building broad coalitions in the work, providing trusted educational forums, and more.

Having loved the outdoors as a child and grown that love into a passion for protecting our waters and the environment, Sally has shown the difference one person can make by working with others for something good. We commend you Sally, for your many campaigns to ensure the future integrity of our shared home.

Sally Howard

NEW YORK



Peter Gagnon & Rick Gartshore

ONTARIO



PETER GAGNON



RICK GARTSHORE



Peter Gagnon and Rick Gartshore are Freshwater Heroes for their dedication to protecting water, wetlands, and drinking water through extreme challenges and legal attacks. About 20 years ago, they formed the Pointes Protection Association, to address concerns about a large development that included destroying wetlands and dredging a canal. They spoke up on behalf of water and wetlands at all decision-making levels. The Ontario Municipal Board issued the final decision, that the project would harm the wetlands and permits should be denied. Unfortunately, what came next was a SLAPP lawsuit (strategic lawsuit against public participation) filed by the developers against the Pointes Protection Association, Peter, and Rick. The case ultimately was decided by the Supreme Court of Canada in favor of Pointes Protection, stating that "SLAPPs hurt people's right to freedom of expression, and that freedom of expression is important to our democracy."

That experience did not discourage Peter and Rick from their water work. Their current efforts include addressing toxic PFAS in drinking water. They are working hard to address contamination from a stream that has been carrying PFAS from a firefighting site and dumping into the St. Mary's River for decades near the Canadian Sault Ste Marie Airport.

We applaud Peter and Rick for their tenacity and willingness to not back down, demonstrating the importance of people getting involved to protect our waters.

ADVOCATES TURN PASSION INTO WATER PROTECTION

Randy Dykhuis

MICHIGAN



Randy transitioned from a supporter of environmental causes to a passionate advocate when concerns about climate change and policy threats in 2016 spurred him to deepen his involvement.

When Randy learned that disposal of coal ash from power plants was contaminating drinking water in the Lansing, Michigan area, he helped form Capital Area Friends of the Environment or CAFE. Randy's work pushed for increased transparency and water testing by the utility, raising awareness about the risks to private wells.

Through his water work, he learned that water rates in Lansing were slated to increase more than 9% in 2024 and 2025, and understanding the impact these increases would have on families, he engaged on water affordability policy. Now as a resident of southeast Michigan, Randy is continuing his advocacy for affordable water, helping make a difference and pushing the message that water is a human right. Thank you, Randy, for your important work on water.

Glory-June Greiff

INDIANA



Freshwater Future recognizes Glory-June as a Freshwater Hero for her lifelong commitment as a citizen advocate and historian. At about age 13, Glory-June wrote her first letter to the editor of the South Bend Tribune in support of establishing a National Lakeshore in the Indiana Dunes. She has never stopped writing since.

For four decades, Glory-June has been involved in history and preservation projects, authoring numerous National Register nominations and writing about the origins of conservation, from which she believes there is still much we can learn. Having loved the dunes and wetlands of southwestern Michigan and northwestern Indiana, she joined Save the Dunes in her 20s and contributed to their protection with her first National Register nomination: Washington Park in Michigan City, Indiana, which included two dunes! Thank you, Glory-June for your lifelong legacy of conservation efforts, advocacy, and dedication to preserving the history of all the special places in the Lake Michigan basin.

Voces Fieles Comunitarias Contra la Opresión

ILLINOIS

In July 2023, nine inches of rain fell in six hours in Cicero, Illinois, causing severe flooding in this majority Latino community. A few residents jumped right in to help their neighbors clean up from sewer backups and assist with applying for relief funds. It quickly became clear to the volunteers that there was a need for an organization dedicated to environmental justice, and they formed Voces Fieles Comunitarias Contra la Opresión (Faithful Community Voices Against Oppression).

Caring for community members, including the most vulnerable, is why Voces exists. They are committed to uplifting residents' voices and needs and ensuring people have access to honest information about issues.

In its two-plus years since forming, Voces has had a significant positive impact on addressing other environmental health threats beyond flooding. The numerous industries in the community are a source of air and water pollution, increasing environmental health risks for residents. To address this, Voces has organized residents to voice concerns to agencies and decision makers, urging for changes to ensure a better quality of life. Voces provided valuable guidance in co-developing Cook County, Illinois' first Environmental Justice Policy Framework. The largest wastewater plant in the world, Stickney receives untreated wastewater from residential, industrial and commercial sources as well as stormwater. Cicero and other surrounding communities experience adverse and disproportionate burdens due to their proximity. Voces requested the Illinois EPA to incorporate environmental justice into review of the pending discharge permit application.

Voces recognizes that what makes the biggest difference is being included in the decision-making at the community level and beyond. We applaud their steadfastness, guided by faith, to secure seats at the table and improve Cicero's public health.

En julio de 2023, la ciudad de Cicero, Illinois, recibió nueve pulgadas (0,23 metros) de lluvia; esta lluvia cayó durante seis horas y provocó graves inundaciones en Cicero, donde habita una población mayoritariamente Latinx. Sin perder el tiempo, algunos residentes ayudaron a los vecinos afectados a limpiar las alcantarillas obstruidas e iniciar el proceso de solicitud de fondos de ayuda. Estos individuos dedicados fundaron la organización "Voces" para continuar con este trabajo.

Las iniciativas de Voces han tenido un gran impacto positivo enfrentando amenazas ambientales que afectan a la salud, más allá de las inundaciones. Voces apoya y asegura que los residentes puedan expresar sus preocupaciones a las agencias y a las personas a cargo de otorgar permisos que afectan la calidad del agua y del ambiente. Cuando se estaba revisando un permiso de desagüe para la planta de tratamiento de agua más grande del mundo (Stickney Water Reclamation Plant), que se encuentra cerca de la comunidad de Cicero, Voces pidió que el EPA de Illinois incorporara principios de justicia ambiental.

Voces no solo responde a problemas; están trabajando activamente para un futuro más saludable. Por ejemplo, la orientación de Voces ha sido fundamental para el desarrollo del Primer Marco de Políticas de Justicia Ambiental en Cook County, Illinois.

Voces reconoce que para lograr hacer cambios, es necesario incluir a miembros de la comunidad en los procesos de decisión. Aplaudimos la firmeza de Voces, guiados por la fe, en asegurar un lugar en la mesa y mejorar la salud pública en Cicero.



Coalition on Lead Emergency (COLE)

WISCONSIN

The Coalition on Lead Emergency (COLE) is a collective of roughly 30 nonprofits, environmentalists, educators, doctors, community members, and activists working to stop lead poisoning in Milwaukee. They team up with families, faith leaders, local groups, and health systems to make the city safer from lead.

Lead poisoning is a big danger to kids' growth, especially since it often shows no early symptoms. In Milwaukee, about 3 out of every 10 children living in older housing have lead poisoning. COLE stresses the need for early and regular testing. By law, children in Milwaukee and Racine, WI must be tested for lead three times before age three and yearly until age five if they're at risk.

One of COLE's major successes is speeding up the replacement of lead pipes, now set to finish by 2037. This, along with more community testing since 2019, are big steps toward protecting kids' health.

COLE's projects like the "Healthy Homes Program" and "Cooking with COLE" focus on the medical and food aspects of lead exposure. They aim to lower lead levels and fight food insecurity in at-risk neighborhoods. However, challenges like poor housing upkeep and the need for more testing remain. COLE also focuses on job training, helping residents from affected areas get involved in lead removal work.

By holding the government accountable and engaging the community, COLE is determined to ensure a safe, healthy future for all of Milwaukee's children. We applaud all the work and successes achieved by COLE to date.



Northwatch

NORTHEASTERN
ONTARIO



Northwatch, based in Northeastern Ontario, is being recognized as a Freshwater Hero for its work to protect Lake Huron and other waters from nuclear and radioactive waste storage and transportation.

Northwatch makes this complex topic accessible to their supporters and community members, and First Nations. By utilizing innovative communication methods to educate on the dangers and solutions, and step by step guidance on how to submit comments, they are securing engagement that truly makes a difference.

Northwatch is a critical voice in the 2026 review of Canada's Nuclear Waste Management Organization's proposed "Deep Geological Repository" project, urging public and Indigenous participation to speak up for protecting the health of Lake Huron. Since 1988, Northwatch has advocated for environmental protection and supported public participation in environmental and social decision-making. Thank you Northwatch, for being a constant protector of Ontario's water resources and communities for almost forty years!



Michigan Against Atomic Waste

MICHIGAN

Michigan Against Atomic Waste formed in August 2024 after news reports that Manhattan Project-era radioactive waste was being transported from New York State and placed in a landfill in Van Buren Township, Michigan, near Belleville. Concerned about public health and potential water contamination, Michigan Against Atomic Waste organized public meetings, engaged experts, and raised concerns with the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy. In response to widespread opposition—organized by Michigan Against Atomic Waste—Wayne County, Belleville, and surrounding communities filed a lawsuit. Their advocacy led to a preliminary injunction and halted the disposal of specific types of radioactive waste.

Separately, Michigan Against Atomic Waste is taking additional steps to appeal the hazardous waste landfill operating license which allows for a significant expansion, including disposal of radioactive waste. We applaud all of Michigan Against Atomic Waste leaders and members for their willingness to get involved in a complicated issue and for their commitment to protect drinking water and surface water in their community.



WELCOME!

Vel Scott, Board Member

Freshwater Future is pleased to welcome Vel Scott as a new board member. Vel is committed to improving public health in her community. Vel is passionate about teaching her community in Cleveland's Fairfax neighborhood healthy cooking and nutrition. 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. 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. Additionally, Vel's previous experience includes court reporting and managing businesses. Through her work to improve community health, Vel values safe and accessible water for everyone.



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Community Support Protects Our Waters

A heartfelt thank you to Northern Michigan's Grain Train Natural Foods Market community for their inspiring generosity, raising \$2,577.64 for Freshwater Future through January's Cents of Community program!

Your collective generosity at the register is truly inspiring and creates a lasting impact on the health of our waters.



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STAY INFORMED. STAY CONNECTED. TAKE ACTION.

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