



2023

Annual Report

A Letter from Debra Walker Johnson, President & Executive Director



Looking back on another busy year, I am proud to share the Forest Preserve Foundation's 2023 Year-in-Review. As we enter 2024, we are continuing to focus on partnerships. Our partners are crucial to our mission of ensuring that all future generations have access to the outdoors. Our partner support allows us to tackle large-scale projects, support new initiatives, and have a more profound impact on forest preserves throughout Cook County. We are proud to report that we surpassed \$3 million in total investments to support conservation-related projects in the Forest Preserves of Cook County.

Our forest preserves offer more than just a place for visitors to connect with nature. They also help keep our communities healthy by filtering our air and water, protecting wildlife, and improving our overall well-being. However, the challenges facing our preserves are complex and vast. While we may think nature can manage itself, the forest preserves require our assistance.

Pollution, invasive plants, and the changing climate continue to pose significant risks to the health of our natural areas. Ongoing restoration is essential in reversing these damaging effects, and we can only achieve this goal by bringing together various stakeholders, local communities, and decision-makers.

2023 marked the completion of a large-scale project begun in 2020, restoring 227 acres in Sweet Woods. We also continued our long-term critical headwater restoration of Spring Lake Nature Preserve, adding another 3.38 acres along Spring Creek. Partner support also helped provide employment opportunities to 114 next-generation environmental leaders. Additionally, we revamped our memorial tree and bench program and raised \$214k from our Conservation Cup, which provides funding to support restoration.

With your support the Forest Preserve Foundation aims to continue this work in 2024 and strives to address new challenges. We will work towards protecting nature and wildlife, connecting communities to nature, enhancing accessibility, developing the next generation of conservation leaders, and increasing ecosystem resilience in a changing climate.

Together, we can achieve more to support restoration, conservation corps programs, and cultural programming in the Forest Preserves of Cook County in the coming year!

Thank you for partnering with us and thank you for your generous support. We look forward to working with you in 2023. I invite you to follow us on our website and social media channels ([Facebook](#), [LinkedIn](#), and [Instagram](#)) to follow the impact of our work.

In Partnership,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Debra Walker Johnson". The signature is fluid and cursive, written over a light gray rectangular background.



We restore our preserves

Our preserves restore us

"Our forest preserves offer more than just a place for visitors to connect with nature. They also help keep our communities healthy by cleaning our air and water, protecting wildlife, and improving our overall well-being.

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Together we can be resilient.

RESILIENCE

RESTORATION

Ecological restoration is the process of returning landscapes to health using scientific knowledge and recognized techniques to create an ecosystem filled with a diversity of native plants and animals.

Funding supports restoration in areas of the highest need, where invasive species threaten sensitive ecosystems and where habitats have been damaged.



Before and after removing invasive species.



Invasive non-native buckthorn, which was brought here to form hedges because it grows densely and quickly, chokes out native plants, with negative ripple effects on native wildlife.



Iza Redlinski paints one especially lovely picture of restoration:

"We remove invasive species and if the area hasn't been neglected terribly and for a really long time, a lot of times the result is beautiful.

There's a seed bank full of seeds and it responds and there's lush vegetation – grasses, sedges, beautiful flowers. Once those come, the insects come – butterflies, bees. And once those come, the birds come and it's great."



Then Iza adds this bit of reality:

"There are not that many areas that are this high quality that have been neglected just for a little while. There are a lot of areas that have been overgrown for 70, 80, 100 years and that seed bank doesn't respond.



Iza Redlinski, Deputy Director of
Resource Management

So, what happens is we clear the invasive brush but there aren't the native grasses or native forbs or there are small amounts, or they're low quality, weedy plants and nothing else is coming back. So, this is where we give mother nature another hand.

We first give her a hand when we remove the invasives. And we give her a hand again to bring back the biodiversity. One of the best ways to do it is to bring seeds to that area."

GRANTS AWARDED

FOREST PRESERVES OF COOK COUNTY

for RESTORATION PROJECTS



Spring Lake Restoration

\$15,000

This grant funded critical Headwater restoration work of 3.38 acres along Spring Creek within Spring Lake Nature Preserve, building on earlier projects.

The Forest Preserve Foundation and the Oberweiler Foundation have partnered in support of restoration in the Spring Creek headwater area since 2018.

By restoring this 3.38 acre area along Spring Creek adjacent to an area restored previously, these grant funds expand the riparian buffer of healthy wet-mesic prairie. Removing invasive buckthorn allows native wetland vegetation to grow along the banks, thereby improving water infiltration, decreasing soil erosion into the waterway, and providing habitats for native endangered species.



Environmental group Openlands emphasizes that Restoration of headwater sites — the habitats that form the origins of our region's rivers and streams — impacts the health of sites downstream, making restoration projects at headwater sites a uniquely effective tool for broader ecological improvement. Healthy headwaters are instrumental in protecting downstream resources, water quality, and providing healthy habitat for countless plant and animal species. Read more in our blog post [HERE](#).



Sweet Woods Restoration

\$16,566 Final installment of a two-year restoration project

This grant was the final installment of a large-scale restoration project in Sweet Woods, a 300-acre Cook County preserve in Glenwood, Thornton, and Lansing, Illinois. Our funding partner on this project was the National Fish and Wildlife Fund.

During this project a total of 227 acres were cleared of invasive brush by ecological contractors and crews from two Conservation Corps Programs: Greencorps Chicago which provides job training for individuals facing employment barriers; and the Forest Preserve Experience which engages high school students whose families use the Housing Authority of Cook County services.

The Conservation Corps crews (nine Greencorps Chicago adult crew members and 21 Forest Preserve Experience youth interns) removed invasive brush and small trees from hard-to-reach areas like ravines and slopes. Additionally, native trees were thinned across 21.4 acres of the brush-clearing footprint to increase light penetration to ground level.

The Forest Preserve Experience crew contributed more than 1000 service hours toward conservation work at the site. All participants participated in environmental science field classes and gained professional skills while removing invasive species from the area.

This two-year large scale project resulted in:

147 acres of upland brush cleared

80 acres of wetland (floodplain) brush cleared

227 acres of foliar spraying

21.4 acres of tree thinning within the upland brush area

GRANTS AWARDED

FOREST PRESERVES OF COOK COUNTY

for VOLUNTEER RESOURCES

Volunteer Recognition

\$1,800 Motorola Solutions partnered with the Forest Preserve Foundation in support of a volunteer recognition event at Busse Woods, Forest Preserves of Cook County.



GRANTS AWARDED

FOREST PRESERVES OF COOK COUNTY

for CONSERVATION CORPS PROGRAMS

Youth Conservation Corps programs are paid experiences that mobilize youth ages 14-19 from across Cook County's diverse communities to heal and nurture the land. Focus is on teamwork, basic job skills, hard work, and environmental education. Our funding partners for these programs were: CICF, Lumpkin Family Foundation, Nicor Gas, Peoples Gas, and Union Pacific.

Forest Preserve Experience

\$20,000

This grant supported an introductory five-week paid summer jobs program for youth served by the Housing Authority of Cook County.

The Forest Preserve Experience is a collaborative program coordinated by Friends of the Forest Preserves (FOTFP) and the Forest Preserves of Cook County (FPCC), with generous support from the Cook County Bureau of Economic Development, the Housing Authority of Cook County (HACC), the Forest Preserve Foundation, and others.



Chicago Conservation Leadership Corps

\$105,000

This grant supported a five-week paid summer jobs program for youth conservationists from Chicago and suburban Cook County.

The Chicago Conservation Leadership Corps is a partnership program coordinated by the Student Conservation Association (SCA), Friends of the Forest Preserves, and the Forest Preserves of Cook County, with generous support from the Forest Preserve Foundation, and others.



CONSERVATION CORPS

Forest Preserve Experience

Crew activity examples

- Remove invasive plants
- Gain nature knowledge
- Learn leadership skills
- Career readiness coaching
- Recreation in nature
- Improve wildlife habitat
- Explore green careers

"My favorite experience this summer was everything. I found every new experience to be fun and enjoyed activities such as learning about butterflies and how to use hand tools like bow saws and loppers. This summer I learned about different species of trees and how to identify poison ivy."

Lytia Simms

Midlothian Meadows crew member



"This summer I learned about a plant identification app called Plantnet from some Forest Preserves Resource Management technicians who came and talked about their jobs to the crew. I also learned about how trees are different from each other and how to identify them and how the work this summer benefits my community."

Antonio Johnson

Midlothian Meadows crew member

"I got to meet new people, learned communication skills, and teamwork skills. I wasn't a big nature girl when I came into this, and I expanded my mind and grew to be more interested in it. I grew to love it and I am definitely coming back next year."

Mia Alicia

Calumet Woods

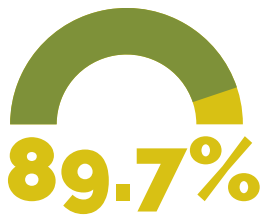


Conserve. Educate. Enjoy.

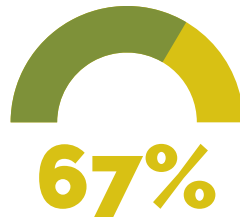
Forest Preserve Experience



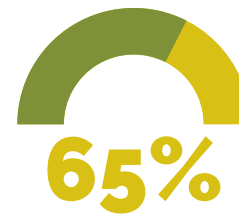
Forest Preserve Experience By The Numbers 2023



Graduation Rate



Feel more knowledgeable
about the Forest
Preserves and local
environment



Feel confident in
their leadership
skills post program

78 youth • 21 adult leaders



On Average
Time Spent

**Hands-on environmental education activities,
exposure to green careers, and nature-
based recreational experience to grow a
connection to nature, green jobs
and the forest preserves**

48%

Conservation Work
24%

Team Building
17%

Job readiness training
11%



10

CONSERVATION CORPS

Chicago Conservation Leadership Corps

"I am now 100% sure conservation is what I want to do with my life." As a second-year member, Bella feels productive and "loves to see the difference one is making, like seeing native flowers grow back after invasive plant removal last year is so rewarding."

Izabella (Bella) Grlica
Little Red Schoolhouse Crew Member

Crew activity examples

- Remove invasive plants
- Plant native species
- Build and repair trails
- Restore and build fences
- Nature play area construction
- Learn leadership skills
- Expand environmental education
- Explore green careers
- Recreation in nature



"My favorite part is around the greenery. Just being in the forest. I think it really calms my mind and my soul. And knowing that I'm doing something that will help the forest grow and be prosperous helps me because I know that I can come back out here and find that peace of mind whenever I need it."

Keisha Liggins
Sand Ridge Nature Center Crew Leader

"What changed? My opinion about wildlife. You always see on the news or social media about the environment. You don't see it going anywhere. But when you do this you actually see a change. You see what you do."

Navaeh Broadnax
Sand Ridge Crew Member



Conserve. Educate. Enjoy.

Chicago Conservation Leadership Corps



Chicago Conservation Leadership Corps

By The Numbers 2023



80%

Plan to Share knowledge learned with friends and family



93%

Will make an effort to conserve resources (such as conserving water, creating less trash, etc.)



85%

Believe that the Forest Preserves and nature are important to their quality of life

36 youth • 15 adult leaders

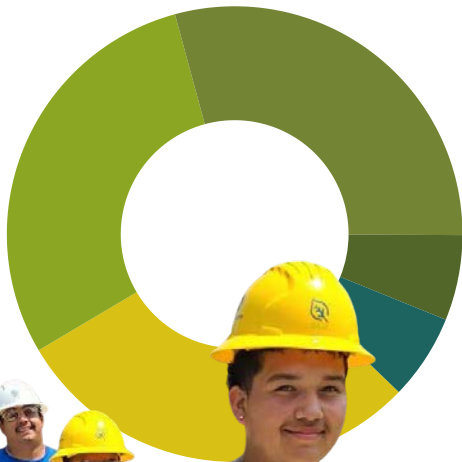
African American/ Black
29%

Hispanic / Latine
29%

White (Not Hispanic / Latine)
29%

Multi-Racial
10%

Asian/ Pacific Islander
3%

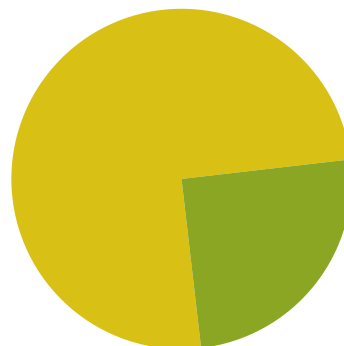


Hours Completed

Conservation Work
5,355

Environmental education, Job readiness training, and nature-based recreation experiences

1,785





Meet Jalanni Matthews, a Shining Example of the Next Generation of Environmental Leaders

Jalanni Matthews' warm presence is matched only by his passionate dedication to keeping nature healthy. Since 2014 when he first joined a Chicago Conservation Leadership Corps crew as a high school sophomore, Jalanni has brought his whole self, worked hard, learned deeply, and built relationships in every avenue and connection provided by the Conservation Corps. He has worked his way to his current job where he coordinates the very program he joined nearly ten years ago.

"...The most rewarding part of my CCLC experience was being able to come back to worksites and see the progress that was made over the course of 5 weeks. It was these experiences that helped me decide that conservation/restoration was something I wanted to completely give myself to. I came back nearly every summer and decided that my education would be centered around conservation/restoration work. My journey would not be possible without the generous donations from donors and conservation corps staff who believed that there was a space for people who look like me in the forest preserves..."

You can read Jalanni's full speech [HERE](#)

Work & Education areas for grants

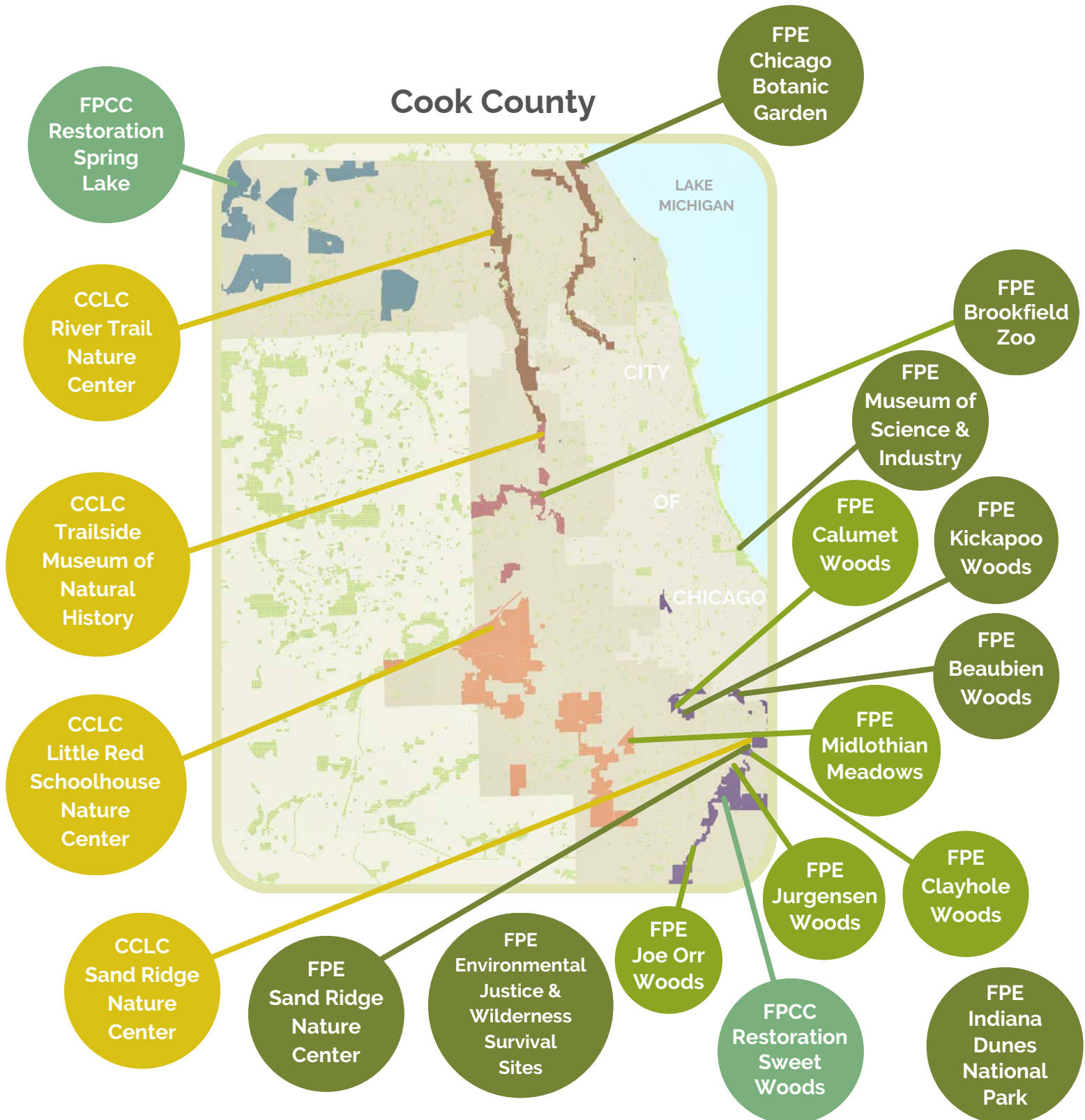
FOREST PRESERVES OF COOK COUNTY

Forest Preserve Experience (FPE) Education Sites

Forest Preserve Experience (FPE) Work Sites

Chicago Conservation Leadership Corps (CCLC)

Restoration Work not part of CCLC or FPE





12TH ANNUAL CONSERVATION CUP

George W. Dunne National Golf Course

This year's Conservation Cup Committee, chaired by Julie Conenna and Angie Richter, created an event that was fun, inspiring, and raised \$214,000. Thank you to our generous sponsors!

Fundraising & Raising Fun

On Thursday, September 7, 2023, more than 80 golfers joined the Forest Preserve Foundation for the 12th Annual Conservation Cup. The rain cleared just in time, bringing lovely temperatures to the gorgeous George Dunne National Golf Course, known for its striking views and championship caliber play. Foursomes not only competed for the cup title, but relaxed, connected, and raised funds to keep the Forest Preserves of Cook County healthy for the enjoyment of all communities.





The fun began with a putting contest, bloody mary bar, and visits with animal ambassadors. This year Forest Preserve staff brought an Eastern Box Turtle and Fox Snake. Some people might have been a tad more comfortable with the turtle than the snake. All enjoyed learning from the knowledgeable and engaging naturalist from Sand Ridge Nature Center.



President Preckwinkle and General Superintendent Arnold Randall gave a warm welcome with opening remarks, sharing gratitude for our generous sponsors and the essential support provided by the Foundation to care for the Preserves. President Preckwinkle visited with foursomes individually on the course to chat and take photos.



On the course, golfers could be heard offering each other encouragement, advice and playful jesting. They cheered the perfect drives and sighed in unison over the near misses.



As evening approached, golfers and non-golfers gathered under the tented pavilion for a cocktail and dinner reception. Guests reconnected with old friends and made new ones, bought raffle tickets and enjoyed the beautiful late summer evening with a soundtrack provided by both crickets and tunes spun by a DJ.



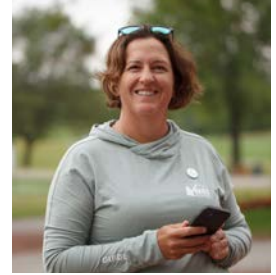
The helicopter ball drop delighted as always. And young family members of our featured speaker jumped in to help gather the balls.



Jalanni Matthews' nephews rounded up the balls with the help of Jalanni and Andrew Johnson, Regional Director of Operations, Indigo Sports, a Troon Company.

The evening program included an opportunity for guests to learn more about how Conservation Cup proceeds help the preserves and people thrive.

The pavillion was filled with a palpable energy of joy and optimism.



After Forest Preserve Foundation President and Executive Director Debra Walker Johnson set the stage, FPCC Resource Programming Manager Alice Brandon spoke about the Conservation Corps and FPCC Deputy Director of Resource Management Iza Redlinski spoke about restoration. Forest Preserve Foundation Board Vice President Theresa Salus and Conservation Cup Co-Chair Anngie Richter expressed words of gratitude.



Jalanni Matthews provided an inspiring highlight to this year's event. Guests were treated to Jalanni's story of dedication, passion and success, Jalanni's moving speech was met with a

standing ovation and the pavilion was filled with a palpable energy of joy and optimism. You can read Jalanni's speech [HERE](#),

Save the Date! Thursday, Sept. 5, 2024

See sponsors [HERE](#) and the photo gallery [HERE](#).

FOUNDATION LEADERSHIP



Debra Walker Johnson
President



Jim Beck
Board Chair

The Forest Preserve Foundation welcomes new members to its board of directors.



Dr. Mike Adkesson

President & CEO of the Chicago Zoological Society,
Director of Brookfield Zoo

Dr. Adkesson is a renowned leader in the care of zoo animals and the conservation of wildlife. As President & CEO of the Chicago Zoological Society and Director of Brookfield Zoo, Dr. Adkesson is committed to building upon the organization's rich history of leadership in animal care and welfare and inspiring conservation awareness in the next generation of people from all backgrounds.



Kandace Lenti

Managing Director, Executive Vice President,
Government, Nonprofit & Healthcare Banking, Wintrust Bank

Kandace Lenti has over 33 years of commercial banking experience with more than two decades serving Government, Nonprofit, and Healthcare clients. Kandace joined Wintrust in June 2011 as Chief Credit Officer, spearheaded the formation of the Government, Nonprofit, and Healthcare group in 2012.



Angie Richter

Senior Principle, Regional Sales Leader, Stantec

Angie brings over 20 years' experience to providing ecological restoration resources and consulting. She leads a team of high-performing scientists, restoration ecologists, environmental planners, and administrative specialists.

The board in action and in the field



Board Meeting at River Trail Nature Center with additional board members via Zoom. Read about the Board visit to River Trail Nature Center [HERE](#)



"It was a great day and a nice, casual way to meet some of the other board members. I enjoyed chatting with others while contributing to something productive..."



"...We all need to find ways to contribute to the greater good."

- Kandace Lenti

FOREST PRESERVE FOUNDATION BOARD SEED COLLECTING EVENT

Contributing,
Learning
& Connecting

Salt Creek Resource Management
September 30th, 2023



Collected: Wild Bergamot • Yellow headed cone flower • Rattlesnake master
Indian Grass • Canada Wild Rye • Late Figwort • Common milkweed
Silphium mix: rosinweed, compass plant, prairie dock
Obedient plant • Culver's root • Wild Quinine

At the Forest Preserve Foundation Board of Directors' Seed Collecting Event on September 30th an energetic group of board members, staff and community members connected with nature and with each other, learned about restoration, and helped make sure native species thrive. Fall leaf color gets all the press, but down on the ground and up-close, native prairie plants also transform at this time of year, bursting with seeds, preparing for future generations

"Getting out like this is an excellent way to experience the work of the Forest Preserves of Cook County firsthand. It reminds us why the Foundation supports our natural areas and restoration workforce programs like the Conservation Corps,"



Board Vice Chair Theresa Salus



"Seed collecting is an activity I've done in the past, but this was the first time doing it with my family. It was amazing to see my kids' excitement as they picked the seeds of grasses and coneflowers. They were more into the activity than I thought they would be. This day left me with a feeling of wanting to do more to support this work."

- Board Vice Chair Theresa Salus

"This took me back in time to my years in college collecting seeds and now it's bonding me with my fellow board members and to the Forest Preserves of Cook County mission to help nature along by collecting native seeds to replant in areas of invasive species. I enjoyed listening and learning from the Forest Preserve staff and feeling their innate passion for the work they do."

- Board member LeeAnn Thomas-Foster



Iza Redlinski, Deputy Director of Resource Management and Kris DaPra, Interim Manager of Volunteer Resources/Stewardship Program Coordinator, shared how native plants help us and why they also need our help.

"We're grateful to Forest Preserves staff. We'll be adding more Foundation events like this, for people who care about nature to connect, learn, and make a difference."

- Theresa Salus, Forest Preserve Foundation Board Vice-Chair



Find the rest of the story, including the natural wisdom of board Vice Chair Theresa Salus' young kids, on the blog post [HERE](#)

FOREST PRESERVE FOUNDATION BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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Executive Relationship Manager
Nationwide Retirement Solutions

Theresa Salus, Vice Chair

National Field Service Manager
Co-op Experiences
REI Co-op

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Jeffrey Gray, Secretary

Partner
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Forest Preserves of Cook County

Cathy Geraghty

Director of Strategic Initiatives,
Forest Preserves of Cook County

FOREST PRESERVE FOUNDATION STAFF

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President & Executive Director

Susanne Fairfax

Communications Manager

Erika Soria

Development Director

Isabella DeLeo

Development Associate

In Gratitude

\$50,000 +

Antares Cook County Golf, LLC
Central Indiana Community Foundation
Forest Preserves of Cook County

\$20,000 - \$49,999

CSX
Lumpkin Family Foundation
National Fish and Wildlife Foundation
People's Gas

\$10,000 - \$19,999

Enbridge
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Oberweiler Foundation
Union Pacific Railroad Company

\$5,000 - \$9,999

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Margaret Fahrenbach
Brad Feldman
Deborah Franczek
Debbie Gaebler-Spira
Claudette Grant
Karen Gray-Keeler
Jeannette and William Herwig
Steve Hughes

continued ...

\$100 - \$999 continued

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Elva Lomeli
Brooke Lord
Bill A. Lowry
Nicholas Majka
Meeting Tomorrow
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Dave Simmons
Linda Stevanovich
Gabriel Wacks
Mary Wallace

*Thank
you!*

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Julie Conenna (co-chair)
Anngie Richter (co-chair)
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Jason DeVore
Kathleen M. Gallagher
Joshua Geppi
Eric R. Rockhold
Mika Ann Stambaugh
LeeAnn Tomas-Foster
Michael Witte

Conservation Cup Event Management

Indigo Sports, a Troon Company
Tailored Events
Troon Partners

Conservation Cup Volunteers

Cheryl Lawrence
Wanda Llorens
Yolanda Myles
Anngie Richter
Theresa Salus
Audrey Tolliver

Office of the Cook County Board President

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Forest Preserves of Cook County

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Office of the General Superintendent
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Department of Permits, Rentals & Concessions
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Student Conservation Association

In-kind

Brookfield Zoo
Chicago Fire
Chicago White Sox
Forest Preserves of Cook County
Indigo Sports, a Troon Company
Revolution Brewing
Troon
Wines for Humanity



LIFETIME INVESTMENT

\$3.2 million

lifetime investment in our mission

791

next generation environmental leaders supported

1,173

acres restored via ecological restoration

“ We believe nature is a vital resource for everyone's enjoyment, experience, and existence. ”

Thank you for your support!
The Forest Preserve Foundation

