



Perspectives

A newsletter highlighting experiences of our members, partners and volunteers



The Conservancy owns and manages more than 13,000 acres of land that are open to the public, free of charge, for all people to explore, enjoy and be inspired by the natural beauty of Western Pennsylvania.

national reckoning to reexamine the causes of and seek an end to racism, bigotry and bias. Black Lives Matter protesters crowded city streets calling for justice, and conversations about race, systematic racism, diversity, equity and inclusion filled homes, classrooms and boardrooms. The significance of these events and issues not only called for self-contemplation and examination, but a renewed focus on how businesses and organizations can help address and root out racism and discrimination.

The Western Pennsylvania Conservancy was among those focusing on these issues and expressing solidarity with peaceful protests for racial unity and social justice. Although diversity and inclusion are well-established core values of the Conservancy, deeper dialogue is still needed, says Conservancy President and CEO Tom Saunders, to understand the totality of social justice issues facing communities of color in our region.



We provide a variety of opportunities for people of all abilities and from every walk of life to experience Fallingwater's intimate connection with nature and striking architecture.

Diversity and Inclusion at WPC: Equity Driven, Community Based, Strategically Focused

2020 was a year like no other. In the midst of a worldwide pandemic, record-setting numbers of wildfires and a presidential election, our country learned of and witnessed the horrific events that led to the wrongful and untimely deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd.

The aftermath of these unprecedented events rallied a

Every three years, the Conservancy examines how it prioritizes its work, projects and programs, with a focus on addressing important needs facing local communities. That robust strategic planning process includes recommendations from the Conservancy's Diversity and Inclusion Council, which was established 13 years ago to improve community engagement and the lack of diversity in the conservation field.

"We will be working with our staff and board during this year on the process of creating the Conservancy's 2022-2024 strategic plan, and I know that in that process we will be evaluating and guiding our approach to diversity, inclusion, equity and community needs such as environmental justice, to help

drive our mission and work over the next several years," Tom notes.

The Conservancy's Director of Community Forestry and TreeVitalize Pittsburgh, Jeff Bergman, leads the Conservancy's Diversity and Inclusion Council and agrees that it is an opportune time to revisit our diversity and inclusion strategic initiative.

Working through subcommittees, the council sets priorities focused on attracting more diverse job and internship candidates and seeks opportunities to partner in underserved rural and urban communities. It also helps develop strategies to recruit volunteers from all walks of life and make Conservancy-owned reserves and Fallingwater more accessible to all, especially for persons with mobility and other physical challenges.

"It's important for us to continue this work while learning and understanding the changing community needs, and while doing so, we'll find ways we can have a greater impact on these issues to advance our conservation and preservation work," says Jeff.

Although there is more work to do, Jeff and Tom agree that efforts to make the Conservancy a more diverse and inclusive organization will continue through the many initiatives and goals set forth by the board and council, in collaboration with community partners.

"Our focus on and commitment to diversity, equity, accessibility and inclusion for current and future generations will remain a core value of the Conservancy," says Tom.



The Conservancy now has ADA-accessible, raised bed community flower gardens in the City of Pittsburgh's Homewood and Shadyside neighborhoods, helping expand gardening opportunities to include people with disabilities and other physical limitations.

READ MORE

Our "We Stand in Solidarity" statement was issued by Tom Saunders in June 2020 in response to racial inequality.



WHO'S MISSING? BUILDING ON A LEGACY OF COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Diversity and inclusion efforts foster different perspectives, renew opportunities and build on vital community partnerships that better engage urban, rural and underrepresented communities in the Conservancy's work.

The Conservancy's longstanding commitment to broad-based community partnerships, including those with other nonprofits, businesses, schools, foundations and grassroots organizations, is a key to successful outcomes.



For more than a decade, students and fathers from Lincoln Elementary School in Pittsburgh's Larimer neighborhood have helped plant the school's WPC community flower garden, which recently transitioned to outdoor classroom and rain garden. Over the years, WPC has partnered with Pittsburgh Public Schools to add green features to every schoolground in the district.

Community partners provide valuable support for protecting land and wildlife habitat, restoring streams, advancing our urban greening efforts and helping to preserve Fallingwater.

For example, WPC Vice President of Government and Community Relations Cynthia Carrow says the Conservancy has been partnering with underserved communities to annually plant and care for community flower gardens, with the help of a diverse force of community volunteers, for decades. "These partnerships continue to be important to our mission," says Cynthia, who manages the community gardens and greenspace program. "We will continue evolving and engaging partners, which will only help us further address the difficult issues around diversity, equity, justice and inclusion across all the areas in which the Conservancy works."

As mutually benefiting partnerships grow, so will the need to continue working strategically to include different groups from all walks of life, including communities of color, faith-based organizations and the LGBTQ+ community. Cynthia adds, "We want to ensure that all feel welcome to engage with all aspects of our work and enjoy the Conservancy's nature reserves and Fallingwater."

The Conservancy is not alone contemplating diversity and inclusion issues and is having conversations with partners to continue asking, "How can we be more inclusive, what groups are we not engaging and how do we reach underrepresented communities?"

WeConservePA, a statewide organization that supports conservation organizations, created a council in 2020 to strategically address diversity, equity, inclusion and justice issues. Collaborative and ongoing, the work examines how partners statewide can learn from regional and local grassroots community conservation efforts.

Emily Hendrickson, the diversity, equity and inclusion coordinator at the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR), agrees that successful diversity and inclusion efforts heavily depend on community partnerships. DCNR is committed to enhancing

interpretive programming at state parks and forests to be more culturally relevant.

"Our goal includes hearing from our partners and finding ways we can make state public land accessible and safe for all and telling inclusive stories in our interpretation of the state's natural resources," she says. "We learned a lot from WPC's model of community collaboration. Together, we want to build on those efforts and opportunities."

Fallingwater Director Justin Gunther says one positive outcome of the COVID pandemic was the ability to reach, inform and engage many new audiences through extensive virtual programming, including previously unserved and underserved learners in rural and urban communities.

Fallingwater staff is also working in partnership with the August Wilson African American Cultural Center as part of a museum community consortium to facilitate community conversations on race and diversity issues.

"This unique collaboration to partner with another museum will help us examine our practices and join forces to rethink efforts to help dismantle discrimination, to help make museum sites more welcoming for all," says Justin, who is also seeking ways to increase accessibility at Fallingwater for persons with disabilities.

The Conservancy will continue working with various partners to engage communities, because we believe the best way to make diversity and inclusion possible is to invest in and engage with people, communities and partnerships from all walks of life.

Landforce, WPC Help Underemployed Break Barriers

When Landforce crew members planted redbud trees with Conservancy staff on Pittsburgh's Three Rivers Heritage Trail and at Point State Park last fall, they weren't just filling a pandemic-induced volunteer shortage. They were learning marketable skills and breaking barriers.

Landforce helps Pittsburgh organizations restore and maintain land and green assets while providing people from underserved communities or who have employment hindrances opportunities to learn skills in the environmental field.

Jasmine Cooper, Landforce director of workforce development, says, "About 80 percent of our crew members have criminal backgrounds that are barriers to them getting hired elsewhere." The nonprofit also serves veterans and those with chronic homelessness or addiction issues, socioeconomic barriers and low education.

Landforce Director of Land Stewardship Thomas Guentner adds, "Most crew members have been black and brown people. That's due to our country's systemic problem that sees them incarcerated at disproportionate rates and has them in disadvantaged school systems."

In addition to planting trees, Landforce has helped Conservancy staff build trails, plant perennials and manage invasive plants, says Jeff Bergman, WPC's director of community forestry. "We believe in the power of people and communities to help us preserve and protect natural areas. Green jobs provide career development opportunities for all people, regardless of one's background." In a similar ethic, the Conservancy's watershed conservation team has trained incarcerated individuals in riparian tree care and management, providing them with marketable skills upon release.

Jasmine explains that Landforce helps crew members see their leadership skills, build resumés and learn to discuss their backgrounds with employers. "We help people realize the potential they've always had, but haven't had the resources to unlock." She adds that when crew members see minority faces that look like theirs in WPC's leadership group, crew members are empowered and inspired to work toward careers in conservation.

Barriers are broken when organizations like the Conservancy partner with Landforce, Thomas says. "When we plant trees on a busy trail, bikers and joggers see a diverse workforce doing environmental work, which perhaps they thought only white people do." And the Conservancy partnership itself is empowering, Jasmine says, because Landforce can hire a demographic that might not get work or a fair wage elsewhere.

"There is nothing more powerful than the push to break barriers," Jasmine emphasizes. "By partnering with us, WPC is saying 'We're working with Landforce because of who they serve.'"



Landforce has helped Conservancy staff build trails and manage invasive plants on Bear Run Nature Reserve and Toms Run Nature Reserve.

READ MORE

Driven by leaders in the environmental nonprofit community, this open letter to the Pittsburgh region addresses community health and environmental justice issues. The Conservancy is a partner in this effort.



TreeVitalize, Green Zone Plan Empower Communities



Sporting an energetic smile and a bright yellow sweatshirt, Porchea Andrews embodies the important work she leads. As Bloomfield-Garfield Corporation's (BGC) Green Zone and Public Safety Coordinator, she is implementing the Garfield Green Zone plan, a greening plan developed by the Conservancy in partnership with Evolve, BGC and Garfield residents.

Porchea's enthusiasm is contagious, her belief in residents empowering. She

envisioned green spaces where families can go for walks and grow food. She notes that BIPOC (black, Indigenous and people of color) communities face disproportionate challenges due to lack of access to clean air and healthy food as well as environmental issues, but "implementation of the Green Zone plan can be a start in removing pollutants and restoring the tree canopy to help improve air quality and residents' overall health. By installing gardens, people can access fresh, nutrient-dense foods. By remediating parks and building trails, people can get active."

As part of the plan, the Conservancy inventoried Garfield's street trees and suggested plantings that could be done with WPC through TreeVitalize Pittsburgh. WPC has done similar assessments and plantings in City of Pittsburgh neighborhoods, including Mt. Washington and downtown

(continued on back page)



Invasive species, including porcelain berry, shown here, cover hillsides in Garfield. Their removal is part of the early stages of implementing the Garfield Green Zone Plan.



The Garfield Green Zone Plan includes an expanded tree canopy and trails and parks where families can spend time in nature.

(continued from page 3)

Pittsburgh, and in the Allegheny County municipalities of Carnegie, Homestead, Coraopolis, Harrison Township and the City of Clairton.

“Urban forestry data shows that increasing canopy cover provides benefits such as reduced asthma, cooler air temperatures and higher property values,” says the Conservancy’s Director of Community Forestry and TreeVitalize Pittsburgh Jeff Bergman. He says WPC’s partners, Pittsburgh Shade Tree Commission and Tree Pittsburgh, help make community forestry projects more equitable throughout the region by bringing opportunities such as workshops and volunteer opportunities into communities.

Although the Garfield assessment noted open drain pipes, invasive plants and few trees, it also found assets like schools, farms and parks. Most important, the plan empowers residents to participate in positive change.

Porchea believes the Green Zone will offer longer-term advantages. “The BGC plans to build affordable homes that people at lower incomes can purchase, and improve blighted areas through the creation of greenspaces,” thereby increasing home values and providing equity to residents. Garfield’s youth can participate in various greening projects that can be resumé builders for environmental careers.

Community members can provide input at Green Zone planning meetings, and community organizations have assisted in invasive removal and community cleanups. After the conceptual plan is presented this spring, work will kick into high gear.

“We are getting excited,” Porchea says, flashing her sunny smile. “This season is going to be good!” 🌿

MARK YOUR CALENDAR

2021 VIRTUAL ANNUAL MEMBERS’ MEETING: MAY 11

Join us, Tuesday, May 11, 2021, at noon, EST, when Tom Saunders, president and CEO, and other WPC staff offer a live overview of the many accomplishments you made possible in 2020 through your generous support, despite the unprecedented challenges of the year.

**Thank you for being a treasured member of
the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy.**

WATCH FOR MORE DETAILS SOON!