Friends Staff Members and Board Chair join representatives from partner organizations, including The Student Conservation Association, Audubon Great Lakes, Greencorps Chicago, and the Forest Preserves of Cook County, for a photo with Forest Preserves President Toni Preckwinkle (far left) and General Superintendent Arnold Randall (far right).

The FPCC honored all of the award recipients with a resolution at the January 22, Board Meeting and presented Friends with the award.
A Resolution
of the Forest Preserve District Board of Commissioners
Cook County, Illinois

Sponsored by
THE HONORABLE TONI PRECKWINKLE, PRESIDENT,
FOREST PRESERVE DISTRICT OF COOK COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

RECOGNIZING THE FOREST PRESERVES OF COOK COUNTY, FRIENDS OF THE FOREST PRESERVES,
STUDENT CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION, GREENCORPS CHICAGO, AND AUDUBON GREAT LAKES FOR
RECEIVING THE NATIONAL RECREATION AND PARKS ASSOCIATION'S INNOVATION IN
CONSERVATION AWARD FOR THE CONSERVATION CORPS PROGRAM

WHEREAS, on September 26, 2018, the National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA) honored the Forest Preserves of Cook County Conservation Corps program with the Innovation in Conservation Award at its annual conference in Indianapolis, Indiana; and

WHEREAS, the NRPA Innovation Awards recognize and honor the latest advancements in the field of parks and recreation and showcase the inspiring park and recreation agencies that have improved and empowered their communities through innovative practices in park design, health and wellness, environmental conservation, and social equity; and

WHEREAS, the Innovation in Conservation Award specifically recognized the Conservation Corps as an creative and original set of programs that create a localized solution to address regional environmental challenges; and

WHEREAS, the Conservation Corps was developed in order to mobilize people to restore nature to health, and to train the next generation of conservation leaders and forest preserve advocates by providing paid, hands-on restoration experiences on the Forest Preserves’ nearly 70,000 acres of public land; and

WHEREAS, the Conservation Corps strives to break down geographic and racial barriers by creating a network where people of all backgrounds work together for a common cause and ensures that participants gain an understanding of local ecology and become nature ambassadors within their communities and among their peers; and

WHEREAS, the program has grown significantly since its inception, from 15 interns in 2005 to 303 participants today; and in 2018 alone helped to improve more than 2,200 acres of public land through restoration activities with Corps members providing over 54,742 restoration service hours; and

WHEREAS, the Conservation Corps program engages participants from across Cook County, including people with barriers to employment, and plays a critical role in reconnecting people and nature and diversifying the conservation workforce and community; and

WHEREAS, the Conservation Corps program was developed in collaboration with and is coordinated and implemented by several organizations including the Forest Preserves of Cook County, Friends of the Forest Preserves, the Student Conservation Association, Greencorps Chicago, and Audubon Great Lakes, demonstrating that strong partnerships result in effectively leveraging resources and expertise; and

WHEREAS, the Conservation Corps is one of the Forest Preserves’ main priorities and one of the Next Century Conservation Plan’s key recommendations in achieving the goal of ensuring native landscapes will thrive for generations.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that Toni Preckwinkle, President, and the Forest Preserves of Cook County Board of Commissioners thank and congratulate the Friends of the Forest Preserves, Student Conservation Association, Greencorps Chicago, and Audubon Great Lakes for their commitment to the success of the Conservation Corps and dedication to the mission of the Forest Preserves and the goals of the Next Century Conservation Plan; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that a suitable copy of this Resolution be presented to the above-referenced partners as a token of appreciation for their service to the Forest Preserves and the residents of Cook County.

Approved and adopted this 22nd day of January, 2019.

TONI PRECKWINKLE, President
Forest Preserve District of Cook County Board of Commissioners
Engaging Cook County’s Next Generation of Conservation Leaders

If only part of our population cares about our public lands, the future for those lands may be in jeopardy. This idea was the impetus of the Conservation Corps, launched in 2005 by the Forest Preserves of Cook County, Illinois, in partnership with Friends of the Forest Preserves (FOTFP), Student Conservation Association (SCA), Greencorps Chicago (Green-corps), Audubon Great Lakes (Audubon) and the Housing Authority of Cook County (http://fpdcc.com/conservation/conservation-corps-programs/). This program was created to address two significant environmental challenges facing the region: people who had become disconnected from nature and a lack of racial diversity in the conservation field.

The Forest Preserves of Cook County is one of the nation’s oldest and largest conservation districts. It manages nearly 70,000 acres of public land that shelter unique plants and animals and provides the more than 5 million Cook County residents with opportunities for recreation, education and relaxation. Protecting nature in this urban environment brings with it unique challenges — invasive species, pollution and a large segment of the community who no longer feel connected to nature.

The Conservation Corps mobilizes youth and adults in paid, hands-on, year-round, summer and six-month experiences that help restore public land. There are high school programs — the Chicago Conservation Leadership Corps and the Forest Preserve Experience Program — that focus on teamwork, basic job skills, hard work and environmental awareness, and adult programs — Habitat Restoration Internship, Friends’ Conservation Corps and Greencorps Chicago — focused on the technical skills needed to pursue a career in conservation and related fields. The Forest Preserves and its partners offer

Conservation Corps Roving Crews, like the one shown here, help the Forest Preserves restore the land.
financial literacy workshops, as well as industry-recognized certifications, such as HAZWOPER (hazardous waste operations and emergency response) training, state of Illinois herbicide licensing and Chicago Wilderness Burn Crew Training, that give participants an edge in transitioning into positions with environmental consulting firms in the Chicago region.

Since its inception in 2005, more than 1,562 participants have gone through the Conservation Corps — the program has grown from 15 interns in 2005 to 264 participants in 2017. The high school programs enjoy an 85-100 percent retention rate — an unusually high rate when compared to similar programs run by the SCA across the United States. And, adult participants have gone on to pursue careers in conservation, as well as other college careers. In addition to nurturing the next generation of conservation leaders, the program’s benefits to the land are also considerable. Conservation Corps members annually restore more than 1,000 acres of land through invasive species control efforts, assist the Forest Preserves in implementing prescribed fires on 1,765 acres and, in the process, have become nature ambassad
Chicago Conservation Leadership Corps (CCLC) is a summer program that teaches high schoolers about environmental restoration. Participants. “The kids get a paid summer experience, but instead of just being a summer job, they receive specific exposure to the Forest Preserves and to potential career opportunities in the environmental fields,” he says.

For Williams, that exposure inspired his post-high school dreams. After he graduates, he plans to attend a university to major in environmental science with hopes of becoming a wildlife biologist, something he hadn’t decided until he joined the Corps.

While not all participants may choose science as their vocation, surveys of Conservation Corps participants indicate that they do gain an understanding of local ecology and are well on their way to having a lifelong avocation for nature. Currently, there is no metric to measure the corps’ impact on the economic mobility of its participants, but strides are being made in diversifying the Forest Preserves’ workforce and in engaging people of all backgrounds in conservation careers and nature-based recreation.

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