

Rainy Weather Doesn't Dampen Spirits at L&C's Water Fest

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Despite the drizzle, hundreds of fifth graders from 10 local schools participated in Lewis and Clark Community College's 11th Annual Water Festival Friday, Sept. 20.



“The purpose of the Water Festival is to get children to connect with water issues, such as conservation, pollution and the presence of invasive species,” said Natalie Marioni, environmental education manager for L&C and the National Great Rivers Research and Education Center. “Through fun, interactive experiences like fishing, we are

teaching children that water can be enjoyable, provide substance and is vital for all life. The Water Festival is the perfect event to start the process of making better water stewards for our communities.”

Approximately 20 exhibits were set up to give students hands-on learning experiences, including lessons in water safety and geocaching. Shanise Hardy, a 10-year-old student from Carlinville Intermediate School, especially enjoyed the activities at this year’s festival.

“It was so much fun and educational, too,” Hardy said. “I’ve never been to anything like this before. My favorite part was fishing and canoeing because I like spending time in nature.”

Teresa Cramer, president and founder of the Mustard Seed Peace Project (MSPP) brought a special guest to speak to the fifth graders during Water Festival. Ruben Gomez, who was born in the Guatemalan highland village of Chichicastenango, talked to the students about the poor water quality in his native country. Gomez serves as a translator and guide for MSPP members when they are in Guatemala supplying much-needed water filters to people in rural areas.

“You don’t know how blessed you are to be born in America,” Gomez said to the children. “You don’t know how blessed you are to have clean water and food. Many people are going hungry all over the world, and Guatemala’s water quality is very bad. You would be surprised to learn how many children die in Guatemala due to the poor quality of the water there.”

At the MSPP station, boys were asked to gather and bundle wooden logs, and girls were asked to collect water in jugs and carry them on their heads.

“The loads Guatemalan children carry are 10 times those you carried today,” Gomez said. “And, they have to walk several miles with these loads every day.”

Ashley Nolen, a fifth grade teacher at St. Ambrose School, once traveled to Ecuador to provide water filters to people in rural areas there, and was very impressed with Gomez’s lesson.

“I feel like kids walk around with blinders on, and I think Ruben took those blinders off, revealing what water quality is like in other countries,” Nolen said. “After Ruben’s presentation, I think the children will be more thankful for what they have.”

Nolen also told Gomez that she thought he made the biggest impact on her students during the festival.

William Roark, a 10-year-old fifth grader from Carlinville Intermediate School, also found Gomez's lesson captivating.

"I think Ruben was very interesting, and it was sad to hear about the kids that die because of the water quality in their country," Roark said. "I'm really grateful that I was born in America where I can have clean water to drink."

Approximately 85 volunteers from local organizations, including L&C and NGRREC, made the 11th Annual Water Festival possible.

"It's fascinating to be able to be a part of the learning experience that these children undergo, and it gives me a fresh take on the perspectives and enthusiasm that only fifth graders can bring," said NGRREC Associate Director Bill Kruidenier, canoe station volunteer at this year's festival.

Cortney Solum, visitors services manager for U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services, set up a station to teach children about the journey birds make when migrating, including the challenges they face and the things people can do to help the birds overcome those challenges. Solum told the children the Mississippi River serves as a map for migrating birds.

"I appreciate the opportunity for students to learn about the Mississippi River and how it affects their lives," Solum said.

Teachers from participating classes took part in an educational workshop on Monday in preparation for the event. They were given instructional materials, which included a laminated map of the Mississippi, a reusable Amazing Aquifer kit and guides for identifying leaves, fish and trees.

"I want to thank all of our sponsors, especially our two top sponsors, Illinois American Water and British Petroleum," Marioni said. "What's amazing is that these and many of our other sponsors not only help by providing financial assistance to the program, but are spending all day out here as either an exhibitor or volunteer at the festival, because they truly see the value in what we're able to bring to these classes. Without our supporters and volunteers we would not be able to reach these educators and their students."

Others sponsors included Southern Regional Groundwater Protection Planning Committee, Madison County, Veolia Water, Wood River Refinery, the Water Division of the Horinko Group, Pepsi, Walmart, St. Louis Bread Company, the Nature Institute and the Great Rivers Land Trust.

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