



The Conservation Legacy Effect

Featuring the Tarrant Regional Water District

Article by LORIE A. WOODWARD
Photo courtesy of CONSERVATION LEGACY

Seven years ago, a happy accident prompted the successful partnership between the Tarrant Regional Water District (TRWD) and TWA.

“TWA hosted an outreach event on Panther Island near Fort Worth on the Trinity River,” said Tina Hendon, Program Manager for the Tarrant Regional Water District (TRWD) located in Fort Worth. “As a Master Naturalist, I received an email encouraging me to volunteer.”

Curiosity spurred her to investigate TWA. She discovered that TWA and TRWD’s individual missions overlapped strongly. Building on common ground, the two organizations formed a partnership for the implementation of the Trinity River Program in the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

“It was either a happy accident or divine intervention, but it was a partnership that just made sense,” said Hendon, noting the partnership also includes Imagination Fort Worth, a non-profit that blends art with education to stimulate creativity.

TRWD is a raw water supplier that provides a reliable, sustainable water supply, vital flood protection and outstanding recreational opportunities to more than 2 million people in North Texas.

“Before this program, TRWD engaged in informal education and community outreach on a much smaller scale,” Hendon said. “TWA brings manpower, educational expertise and contacts in the school district that help us reach students and teachers in a way we wouldn’t otherwise. On our own, TRWD doesn’t have the staff or the internal structure to undertake a program of this scope and scale.”

Since its inception in 2012, the Trinity River Program has reached 8,403 students from 27 schools in grades 4-12 through hands-on field days held along the river’s edge. During the field days, Texas Master Naturalists and other volunteers lead students through five different experiential stations.

“One day a student, as part of debrief, said, ‘I didn’t know there was a river in Fort Worth,’” said Sarah Grella, Watershed Coordinator for the TRWD. “Being able to provide a connection to nature—to help children understand that wild elements that need our care still exist even in a city—is a basic, but profound and life-changing connection.”

Each organization contributes in its own way. TWA takes the lead on field day logistics, school and volunteer recruitment and coordination in addition to developing TEKS-aligned lessons and conducting teacher trainings. TRWD delivers technical information in an accessible manner using its stream trailer that demonstrates how watersheds shape rivers and streams at the landscape level. Imagination Fort Worth maintains relationships with Fort Worth ISD and provides storytelling or watercolor painting activities that reinforce the day’s lessons and further engage the students through creativity.

“These cooperative field days create interaction between area residents and the river, creating a sense of pride and ownership as they come to understand it’s a living body of water,” Michelle Wood-Ramirez, Watershed Coordinator for the TRWD. “People can’t—and won’t—advocate for something they haven’t experienced or don’t understand. The field days put knowledge in their hands in different ways, so everyone can grasp it.”

From a conservation education perspective, why are strong partnerships like the one between TRWD, TWA and Imagination Fort Worth important?

TH: “The fact that there are so many organizations and so many volunteers involved is important. TRWD couldn’t do this on its own. The job is too big for just one group or a handful of volunteers.

Each partner has a clear perspective on how best to deliver our individual messages. We use different language and different tools, so people can engage in different ways. Together, we create different avenues that allow people to connect to the same natural resource, the Trinity River.”

MRW: “The Trinity River Program is unique. There is nothing like it in North Texas. It is a partnership that makes a difference now—and in the future. And, it’s an effective model for engagement that TWA is hoping to expand throughout the basin, which will stretch its reach from North Texas to the Gulf of Mexico. Where there once was a gap in education, TWA is truly filling a niche and a need.”

SG: “Our partnership allows us all to focus on what we do best, so we’re not spread too thinly. By working in our own areas of expertise, we make the biggest impact because we’re not reinventing the wheel. If we all tried to do our own things, we would be squandering the resources of North Texas while lessening the overall impact. By aligning our efforts where there is a significant overlap in our goals and missions, we make the most efficient use of our time, our resources—and we connect with students, teachers and parents in a meaningful way that can shape the future.”