



THE WARBLER

The annual newsletter of the Friends of Welty Environmental Center Fall, 2025 (Volume 25, Issue 1)

3 MANAGERS AND ME by Brenda Plakans, Executive Director

2025 has been amazing—and there’s still most of a fall semester to go. With all three Program Managers firmly ensconced, the co-leadership experiment has been a resounding success. Each staff member (Elle-Career Tech Ed, Maddie-Camps, Pam-Field Trips) has taken complete ownership of their area and we are seeing growth in all aspects— participation, revenue, number of events, variety of lesson plans. Their energy is inspiring and I look forward to the strategic planning our FWEC Board is doing in 2026.



Welty’s full-time staff (l to r): Elle Schraufnagel (Prog. Mgr.); Brenda Plakans (Exec. Dir.); Pam Garland-Gjestson (Prog. Mgr.); Maddie Wendrick (Prog. Mgr.) at our volunteer appreciation Biergarten event in June.

Each manager has taken on new responsibilities in their roles, and write about these activities in the following pages. Pam has developed extended field trips for every 5th grade class in the Beloit area and we hosted 538 kids from all three districts in April and May (p. 2). Maddie redesigned our camp curriculum to be more neuro-inclusive and emphasize free nature play (p.5). Elle was tasked with creating her new position that emphasized environmental careers, and she reflects on that work with 6-12th graders over the past two years (p.3). This is the important work that our wonderful donors make possible and that Stateline educators value as a complement to in-school activities.

It is a privilege to work with this team and exciting to see their ideas about environmental education become a reality.

One of my primary functions as Executive Director is to fundraise to support their work, so the managers can focus on creating quality content without much pressure to generate revenue. And to that end, I’m very grateful for the generous donors who contributed to this summer’s appeal. Between their gifts

and a matching grant that encouraged new Lifetime members, we raised \$62,370! Aside from endowment contributions, this funding goes towards keeping our fees low so Welty programming doesn’t create financial burdens for families or schools and managers can focus on serving participants.

I hope you can join us for a fall event (bats! rocks! bonfires!) to see this talented group in action. Welty is so lucky to have them.



WELTY’S MISSION

To provide leadership in environmental education by equitably engaging the diverse residents of the Stateline region with activities that foster an appreciation of nature and promote environmental stewardship

2025-26 BOARD

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5TH GRADE FIELD TRIPS FOR THE STATELINE AREA

by Pam Garland-Gjestson, Program Manager

For the first time, Welty was able to invite every 5th grader in the City and Town of Beloit to Big Hill Park for end-of-the-year field trips. Each district worked with staff to develop appropriate curriculum and activities, and each trip received outside support to keep the costs low for schools.

Welty received an ARPA (American Rescue Plan Act) grant from the City of Beloit to fund 5th grade trips for the School District of Beloit (SDB). For this innovative trip, the 5th graders from six elementary schools came out to Big Hill Park for three consecutive school days (one school at a time). Students had nature-based lessons and worked in small groups culminating in a final project about the effects of littering in Big Hill Park. The projects were in the form of posters, podcasts, movies and live skits. With the help of our incredible Welty volunteers and BMHS highschoolers, each group had a “litter leader” to assist with their project.

The ARPA grant also funded an overnight-camp style trip for 5th graders from The Lincoln Academy (TLA). Scholars hiked, looked for macroinvertebrates in the creek, made nature crafts, shot archery, learned how to make a fire with flint and then cooked their dinner and dessert over a campfire. We also received a grant from the Rock County Conservationists to fund a trip with Town of Beloit 5th graders. This was Welty’s first time hosting Garden Prairie students and they had a fun day of Welty camp doing structure building, archery, derby car building, and s’mores—of course!

In total, we hosted 538 5th graders this spring and all three schools are coming back in 2026. It is wonderful to have this trip serve as a capstone activity for these soon-to-be middle schoolers and their excitement was infectious!

WE LOVE OUR WELTY VOLUNTEERS! by Pam Garland-Gjestson

Our volunteers are essential to the success of our field trips. Because of their dedication, we’ve been able to significantly increase the number of local students we serve by inviting more schools to Welty to experience our programs. It would be impossible without their help. As a staff, we’ve also learned so much from our volunteers as many of them are Master Naturalists and have been leading Welty field trips for years. Each volunteer has their own unique style of leading programs and we—as well as the kids—love learning from them.

A big THANK YOU (numbers are hours of 2025 service) to Dave Bendlin (28), Bruce Cawkins (32), Deb Fallon (12), Chuck Goldstein (44), Amy Jensen (16), Liz Meek (101), Sarah Parsons (31), Jill Schraufnagel (5), Dan Summers (9), Dick Vogel (22), and Harry Wiersgalla (5). We also received help from BMHS Environmental Studies classes and the Rock County Conservationists.



In June we held a volunteer appreciation Biergarten event, which was a chance to relax and taste Point Brewery samples along the banks of the Rock River.

2025 5TH GRADE TRIPS



After lunch each day, SDB 5th graders had time to chill out in the Welty program room.



SDB students took at least one long hike each day to observe various ecosystems at Big Hill.



We had an amazing volunteer team, including (L to R): S. Parsons, B. Cawkins, C. Goldstein, and L. Meek.



A creek walk in the lower park was a big hit for TLA scholars.



Garden Prairie students built fires and cooked s’mores.

2025 SUMMER SCENES



Kerry brought their early career program for a volunteer work day.



Welty had a table at the Beloit Farmers Market in June.



CareerTek campers learned about beekeeping during Farm to Table week.



During forestry week, CareerTek campers learned how to identify native plants.



Wastewater treatment was a topic for CareerTek after-school programs in the spring.

MY TIME DEVELOPING WELTY'S CAREER TECH ED PROGRAM

by Elle Schraufnagel, Program Director

Over the last two years, I have had the pleasure of developing career and technical education (CTE) programming at Welty. Developing CTE programming has definitely been a learning experience. I have done a lot of research on environmental engineering as well as environmental problems that could potentially be solved with engineering. There is not much curriculum out there that discusses these things, especially not with groups under 18 years. It took a lot of trial and error to find things that worked—once they worked I developed more from the good and tried to leave behind the bad.

My first CTE-centric project was developing an egg drop program, where students would design devices to protect their eggs from breaking when dropped from a great height. In this program I used the engineering cycle of rebuilding and testing, but also included economics in the lesson. I asked students to budget for materials and set the cost of materials in accordance with their value in the build. This teaches the students not only how to make a design that works, but to make it under constraints and without wasting materials. The paired concepts of function and cost challenged egg-drop students and I have developed lessons for building prototypes of levees, windmills, and wastewater treatment plants using these constraints.

In this position I have grown Welty's amazing relationship with Hendricks Career Tek. In 2025, we hosted three summer academies where we did work in the field and invited local guest speakers on each topic. I also taught an afterschool program about environmental engineering. This program is very hands-on and includes an introduction to a topic and uses this theme to build a design based in teams. Often, there is friendly competition to see who gets the most energy from their waterwheels or who has the levee that holds back the most water .

Schools are very interested in growing their CTE offerings, so it's great to help Welty become a pioneer in this area. In fact, we're adding a new 6th grade field trip about wind energy in December to expand our offerings into middle school!
(In December, Elle leaves us for new adventure in Michigan. We will miss her dearly, but are grateful for the time she has been on Welty staff.)



Elle leads a water quality field trip for Lincoln Academy 6th graders. They measured nitrates, phosphorus, and dissolved oxygen in creek and turtle tank water.



REFLECTIONS ON MY SUMMER INTERNSHIP by Alex Johnson, WAICU intern

This internship has given me an opportunity to really learn about nature and engage with it daily, which has made me all the more invested. During my internship I was set into various roles that I had no prior experience with and had to learn, adjust, and find a way to excel. Some of my professional roles included leading nature programs at local libraries, creating and coordinating a public fitness event at Big Hill Park, and meeting with the Parks and Rec board of Beloit to begin formal volunteer workdays.

One of the key takeaways from working at a nonprofit is my understanding of just how wholesome our work is. There is no outside angle to collect profit, we are simply here to educate and provide more opportunities for the public to engage with nature. There is a truly authentic feeling about the way we operate as a non-profit that makes me feel as though I can make an impact on our world. This work gives without taking and I feel all the more fulfilled because of it. This internship has been the best school/work experience of my life, and I am beyond grateful for Welty and WAICU (WI Assoc of Independent Colleges and Universities) for this opportunity. *(Alex attends Carroll College, studying pediatric physical therapy.)*



Alex and Maddie are dressed in their privateer best for Climate Pirates week during summer camp. Argh!

MY ROCK INTERNSHIP AT WELTY by Lisa Ramsden, Rock Intern



In July, Lisa assisted during Welty's once-a-week visits to SDB's 4th and 5th grade summer school as part of her internship.

Overall, my favorite thing about my internship was the work environment and the relationships I formed with my coworkers. My experience made me reconsider my career path because I had originally wanted to be a research biologist, but working with kids at the Welty Center made me consider environmental education instead. The biggest thing I learned was how to interact with kids of different ages to keep them engaged, learning, and having fun. I also enjoyed going bird watching and taking pictures of birds to create a "Birds of Big Hill Park" booklet.

I'd like to thank Elle, for always believing in me and teaching me that it's okay to be imperfect; Elle, Maddie, Pam, and Alex for supporting me and making my internship more fun than it had any right to be; Welty Environmental Center and Brenda for hosting me as an intern.

2025 RESTRICTED FUNDING (GRANTS, DONATIONS)

\$2950	UW– Madison CCR Gift Fund	CareerTek camps, Sky's the Limit camp for autistic teens
\$6,000	WI Assoc of Ind Colleges (WAICU)	10-week summer intern position
\$10,250	City of Beloit Community Devel Block Grant	6-12th grade programming (Ecofairs, 6th grade field trips, interns)
\$13,000	Leadership Devel Academy	Preschool field trip support (2 years)
\$25,000	City of Beloit ARPA grant	5th grade 3-day field trips (first year of two)

MY FIRST SUMMER AT WELTY by Maddie Wendrick, Program Manager



Welty's August summer camps were run by (L to R): A. Johnson, P. Garland-Gjestson, E. Schraufnagel, M. Wendrick, K. Wolf, A. Laursen.

One year ago, I stepped into the program manager role at Welty, focusing on camps and public programs. Coming from extensive environmental education experiences, I joined Welty staff with big aspirations of having larger responsibilities. This role has granted me the opportunity to lean into my creativity, education, and leadership skills. In my role as camps and public programs manager, I have planned and executed various public programs as well as carrying out all summer and no school day camp programs.

My first mentoring experience this year has been incredibly rewarding. We had WAICU intern, Alex Johnson, join us as a summer outreach education intern (my very first employee). As summer camp quickly approached, we also added camp environmental educators, Kat Wolf, Akelalyn Laursen, and Lisa Ramsden to our team. Each and every one of them came in with such a positive energy and



A favorite afternoon break for campers was to play on hammocks.

eager to learn about what we do. Without them, our camp could not have been so successful.

Having experience as an educator at other nature centers really gave me the best experience to put out a great Welty summer camp. This summer, 30% of our camp families were brand new to Welty! We had our highest registration for all weeks ever, plus lots of waitlist inquiries. We made some changes to our camp structure and schedule and here's what three families had to say about their children's experience:

I was so nervous to send [my camper] to a camp with so much unstructured time; this has typically been where his anger and yelling happens. But somehow, in this magical place, he never seemed to truly have a meltdown and seemed to learn a lot about managing friends and playing well with others.

This was [my camper's] first time to Camp Welty. Every day on the way home she talked about how much fun she had. She says next year she wants to go for all five weeks!

The counselors are attentive, always smiling and engaging with the kids.



At the end of the summer, our young conservationists spread native seeds in the Big Hill prairie.

I'm especially proud that we included so much nature play and unstructured time into our programs, as those are one of my greatest passions when it comes to working with children. The benefits of these activities have been expressed by so many of our participants. So incredibly fulfilling!

Brenda, Elle, and Pam have been nothing but the best support system for me. Our work environment and culture is wonderfully positive- unlike anywhere else I've been. I hope to keep learning and building our creativity together as we move forward into my second year.

WELTY ENVIRONMENTAL CENTER



1201 Big Hill Court #1 Beloit, WI 53511

TO:

----- Detach & send to FWEC 1201 Big Hill Ct. #1 Beloit, WI 53511 -----



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