

KAY NELSON

Volunteer of the Year

By Katie Coffin

Kay Nelson traces her passion for the environment back to her childhood.

"I'm an avid swimmer, and as a kid growing up, we would vacation in Myrtle Beach," Nelson recalls. "Some of the pollution that was coming up onto the beach after storms really bothered me. Even as a kid, I remember thinking, 'That's not where that belongs.' "

Today, Nelson is an advocate and convener in her role as director of environmental affairs with the Northwest Indiana (NWI) Forum, the region's economic development entity. Her work influences policies that protect Indiana's natural resources while fostering a healthy operating climate for area industries.

She jokes that she is a "professional meeting attender," often gathering with various stakeholder groups to identify issues and work through them.

"I feel it's really important to let as many people know about an issue as possible, even if they only have a remote touch on it," Nelson reflects. "A lot of things that are happening in Northwest Indiana can continue to happen without me making people in central Indiana aware of it. However, I've learned a lot from people in central and southern Indiana through meetings with the Indiana Chamber's Environmental Committee, so in turn, I know people can learn a lot from our experiences."

'Carp Queen'

Nelson laid the foundation for her breadth of environmental knowledge while studying at Purdue University, where her degree in natural resources and environmental science required classes related to land, air and water.

Following graduation, she worked for the city of East Chicago in the sanitary district focusing on compliance with Environmental Protection Agency regulations, specifically industrial pre-treatment. Next came a stint with the Indiana Department of Environmental Management (IDEM) in Gary, giving her a broader scope of the region's industries, stakeholders and environmental issues. In her current role with the NWI Forum, she supports the environmental, public policy and manufacturing committees, and she is a registered lobbyist.

Nelson is a key voice for Indiana on the Great Lakes Commission (she was the first non-governmental appointment from Indiana) and was involved in negotiations for the Great Lakes Compact. She also serves on the Chicago Area Waterways System Advisory Committee (CAWS AC), a group developing recommendations for preventing invasive species transfer between the Great Lakes and the Mississippi River basins.

As a testament to her sense of humor and her role with CAWS AC, Nelson proudly owns a T-shirt that reads "Carp Queen."



Kay Nelson serves as chair of the Indiana Chamber's Environmental Committee, often meeting with state officials to discuss the latest issues.

Nelson lends her dauntless spirit and expertise to the Chamber's Environmental Committee, serving as chair and overseeing the land, air and water sub-committees.

"Kay brings to the table a good, diverse knowledge of all environmental issues," recognizes Vince Griffin, the Chamber's vice president of environmental and energy policy. "She has the ability to identify and ask questions. Some people won't do that, but she's not afraid to speak out and express an opinion. Kay gets deep into technical issues; she has a thirst for that detail."

The Indiana Chamber released *Water and Economic Development in Indiana: Modernizing the State's Approach to a Critical Resource* in 2014 as part of its *Indiana Vision 2025* long-range economic development action plan. The report calls for implementation of a statewide water strategy.

"I thought it was a very necessary, far-reaching procedure to do the water study," Nelson notes. "I'm really excited, and very pleased and proud for the Chamber to have had this document as part of its *Indiana Vision 2025* process. The work that's getting started and ongoing as a result of that is just going to be beneficial to the state all the way around."

Continued progress

Nelson says she is "amazed" by the contrast between the environment that existed when she first arrived in Northwest Indiana and today.

Nelson remembers an incident at the beginning of her career in East Chicago, when she had to drive to another section of town. Even though it was the middle of the day, her boss suggested she turn on her headlights for the trip. She passed an aluminum smelting facility that produced such a thick haze of smoke when a temperature inversion occurred that headlights were necessary.

Fast forward to a few years ago when Nelson was part of a group that hosted Chinese engineers and took them on a boat tour of Lake Michigan. The engineers were shocked to see a clear, odorless lake with swimming, fishing and boating taking place in the same water used by shipping ports and industry. They showed her photographs of the lake in China for which they were seeking solutions on how to purify and maintain cleanliness – Nelson compares that water to "Nickelodeon slime."

Indiana's progress continues, with Nelson helping facilitate

productive conversations between industry, environmental groups and policy makers.

“One of the things I try to emphasize when I’m meeting with an opposing group is that all of us live here; no one wants to intentionally damage our living arrangements,” Nelson states. “It’s never an evil, mean-spirited decision that’s being made. When an industry has to make a decision concerning the negotiations of their permits, they’re doing so based on the best-available technology and information and science and research that’s been done at the federal and private-sector levels to determine these permit limits.”

No place like Northwest Indiana

Nelson is originally from Ohio, but went to high school at Bishop Dwenger in Fort Wayne. Her family moved often when she was a child, and Purdue was the 12th school she attended.

Nelson has since settled in St. John, Indiana with her husband, Craig. She volunteers in leadership roles with the Dunes Learning Center, Lake Area United Way and Purdue University Calumet Water Institute.

She credits several mentors with helping her succeed throughout her career, including



The Portage Lakefront and Riverwalk Pavilion is the perfect location for a business and environmental discussion convened by Nelson on Great Lakes resources.

Griffin and Lee Botts, who founded both the Lake Michigan Federation (now Alliance for the Great Lakes) and the Dunes Learning Center. She adds that former environmental managers (from many of Northwest Indiana’s large industries) with whom she worked

continue to be mentors in their retirements.

“I’m just blessed,” Nelson concludes. “I’m surrounded by people who do their jobs well, are passionate about their jobs and, more importantly, are willing to share their expertise, knowledge and opinions.”

RESOURCE: Kay Nelson, Northwest Indiana Forum, at www.nwiforum.org

Springleaf congratulates the Annual Chamber Award Winners!

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