

The 2020-21 global pandemic created challenges for organizations that thrive and depend on active, engaged, community involvement, leadership, and volunteerism. Community-based watershed organizations were no exception. The Yellow Breeches Watershed Association (YBWA), near Harrisburg, experienced a period of inactivity and lack of involvement during this turbulent time. However, it also created the opportunity to reflect on what the organization could do differently- and better- when life returned to “normal.” With new approaches to leadership, organizational and event management, outreach, and yes, time-consuming hard work, YBWA has since experienced a renewed energy and commitment by volunteers and an almost doubling in their member base and their Board. POWR had the opportunity to talk with the President of YBWA, Shawn Fabian in April 2024.

Shawn is very passionate and dedicated to the cause of keeping his local waters clean. While serving as President of YBWA, he is also on the board of another watershed organization in the area, a Master Watershed Steward, and has a career in the field. According to Shawn, YBWA attempted to rebrand themselves just before the pandemic started, but that it “... took the wind out of our sails quite a bit.” Despite the lack of engagement YBWA kept themselves afloat and have now reached a point where the organization is thriving.

One secret to their success was a shift in focus of the organization’s communication efforts. Shawn led the organization in its effort to evaluate the impact of their outreach efforts and to make needed changes including targeted engagement with the community through effective use of social media. This new approach has allowed YBWA to reach a larger audience than they could through simply emailing members. Shawn shared that even he was surprised by the success of this campaign, when he heard that some of the attendees of events held in 2023 weren’t even members of YBWA, but showed up because they saw the event on Facebook and it sounded like something fun to do. “No matter how many events we go to, we’re not reaching a thousand people,” is what Shawn had to say when discussing the effectiveness of social media to engage with the community.

Another key part of YBWA's success has been their hardworking and dedicated board. A big part of their organizational rebrand was to change the way the board operates. Instead of every board member trying to handle every responsibility, they have now focused their individual strengths to accomplish specific assigned tasks. Every board member contributes in unique ways, without duplication of effort, to keep the operation running smoothly. They also have divided up the work associated with running the organization and volunteer events, so no one gets burned out or 'bored' of serving on the board!

With their new uptick in membership, Yellow Breeches Watershed Association has been able to accomplish much more than they have in the past. YBWA hosted a successful trash cleanup along 10 miles of stream in their watershed. YBWA also participates in many of the local community events in Cumberland County, such as Earth Day and StormFest. It's exciting to see what else will be in store in 2024.

Still, YBWA remains a small organization with a big wish list for future activities and impacts. If you are interested in learning more and getting involved with the Yellow Breeches Watershed Association, visit their website. Better yet, go to an event where you can meet Shawn and others.

Yellow Breeches Watershed Association's website: <https://www.ybwatershed.org/>

YBWA's Facebook page can be found here: <https://www.facebook.com/ybwatershed>.