

Chalfant Run-Thompson Run Watershed Association

Making an Impact: Historically, Now, and for the Future

When neighbors gathered in 2018 to save the defunct and no longer operational Churchill Valley Country Club - located about ten miles from Pittsburgh - and turn it into a dedicated community green space, they had no idea that this effort would eventually evolve into something much bigger. After successfully permanently protecting the beloved 150-acre rapidly rewilding greenspace, now officially known as the Churchill Valley Greenway and owned by the Allegheny Land Trust, the group realized that the lovely little stream, the Chalfant Run, didn't end at the Churchill Valley Greenway, but continued for many miles and joined with the Thompson Run. In an effort to improve stream health and water quality, they joined forces with other active community members from Thompson Run to create the Chalfant Run-Thompson Run Watershed Association (CRTRWA). Located in the eastern suburbs of Pittsburgh PA in Allegheny County, the Chalfant Run-Thompson Run Watershed covers approximately 18 square miles with about 33 stream miles. CRTRWA has had remarkable success since its establishment, from hosting stream stewardship events to watershed-wide water sampling.

Recently, POWR had the opportunity to meet with Renee Dolney, Executive Director of the CRTRWA, and chat about the progress the organization has made since its founding.

Renee's passion and excitement for her volunteer work, as well as those of the other volunteers of CRTRWA, was abundantly clear from the moment we started talking. Under her leadership, CRTRWA has focused on increasing visibility and fostering collective stewardship for the watershed's streams. Historically, due to abandoned mine drainage and other industrial pollution, many streams in the area were considered dead and could not support life due to their poor water quality. However, after a series of environmental protections starting with the Clean Water Act of 1972 and, of course, time, these streams have bounced back. "Our streams are living," Renee said, "They've got creek chubs... And, we have crayfish and snakes. We do have life. That for me is enough to get the whole ball rolling." Partially due to the poor conditions of the local streams and the reputation that

came with them, the community often ignored these waterways. “People would walk by the stream, and no one knew the name of the stream. It had been completely forgotten and completely overlooked,” Renee shared. This has inspired one of the main components of the organization’s mission, which is to take people outside and get them reconnected with the streams that are right in their backyards.

The CRTRWA has coordinated several stewardship and educational events to increase visibility and awareness of the streams within the watershed. One recent event was a collaboration with the Penn State Master Watershed Stewards and the Wilkinsburg Public School District, which brought a group of fourth graders from Turner Intermediate School outside and involved in educational programming related to the watershed and nature in their community.

One of the most significant problems in the watershed is Abandoned Mine Drainage (AMD). A harrowing reminder of the mining industry that used to dominate the area, AMD occurs when water is contaminated after encountering sulfur, heavy metals, or other harmful materials from abandoned mining facilities, which can threaten the environment as well as human health. Several AMD sites have been identified within the area and within the Chalfant Run-Thompson Run watershed. To combat one major discharge, a \$2.7-million-dollar passive AMD treatment project is being installed at the Churchill Valley Greenway by the Allegheny Land Trust. CRTRWA volunteers brought their concerns to staff of the Allegheny Land Trust, hosted tours of the property, and served as champions for the series of next steps necessary for the implementation of the plans and infrastructure for remediating AMD.

One of the greatest assets of the CRTRWA is its partnerships. “The way we are able to run as an all-volunteer group, is we’ve created partnerships,” Renee shared, describing another partnership that helped pave the way for much of the AMD-related research and assessment work in the watershed. The Pittsburgh Water Collaboratory of the University of Pittsburgh has played a critical role in researching and in gathering the data that is needed to apply for the funding for AMD treatment systems. In 2022, Patrick Shirey, PhD and

Associate Director of the Pittsburgh Water Collaboratory, helped fund a student, Andrew Clarke, to begin sampling and testing the water from nineteen different sites across the watershed. This data identified the areas around the watershed with the worst AMD pollution. Following this work, Dr. Shirey and his students have continued to sample and test the water across the CRTRWA watershed, at locations where the pollution is the worst. Renee explained the current work that is underway, “We’ve narrowed that down to six that we are now monitoring over the course of a year.” Twelve months of water quality monitoring and the analysis of this data are required to apply for funding from the PA Department of Environmental Protection for the planning and design leading to construction of these AMD remediation facilities.

The CRTRWA has accomplished a lot since its founding in 2018 but still has big aspirations for its future, looking to further their environmental education programming and help facilitate the installation of several more AMD treatment plants. If you are looking to get involved in this great organization, you can find more information on their website.

<https://www.chalfantrun.org/involved.html>

IMAGES:



Fall Planting: 2022 Chimney Swift Tower



Cleaning up the watershed



Enjoying a hike in the watershed