

For conservancy's WHIRL graduates, learning about watershed is a natural



Meadow G. Webb, WHIRL graduate, explains an aspect of the program to visitors at Friday's graduation ceremony at Millsite Lake in Redwood. Kara Dry/Watertown Daily Times



Henry P. Brennan, 15, holds an invasive goby fish, taken from Oneida Lake for education purposes, during the Indian River Lakes Conservancy's WHIRL graduation ceremony and community outreach event. Kara Dry/Watertown Daily Times

## Environmental EDUCATION

By **CHRIS BROCK**  
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**REDWOOD** — The Indian River Lakes' WHIRL program is a natural for students like Meadow G. Webb, holder of a name that conjures up our natural environment.

But WHIRL — Water and Habitat on the Indian River Lakes — is a teen

environmental education program designed for students of all interests managed by the Indian River Lakes Conservancy. The program aims to bring together environmentalists of different ages and experiences to learn from one another and to grow a community of people principled around protecting water quality, especially within the Indian River Lakes watershed.

On Friday, Aug. 12, a graduation ceremony was held for the 10 students who participated in this year's five-week summer WHIRL program. Educational displays explaining some of the things students explored and learned were set up at the Millsite Lake boat launch on Cottage Hill Road.

Project WHIRL began in 2019 as a collaboration between the Indian River Lakes Conservancy, the Indian River Central School District, the Friends of Recreation Conservation and Environmental Stewardship program at the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry, the Izaak Walton League and the St.

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Meadow G. Webb displayed her lake-related crocheted animals and plants along with invasive plant species information at the WHIRL community outreach event and graduation ceremony. Kara Dry/Watertown Daily Times

“I always tell people your lakes are only as clean as the streams you feed it.”

**MAT H. WEBBER**

President of the Central New York Izaak Walton League of America



# WHIRL

From A7

Lawrence Eastern Lake Ontario Partnership for Regional Invasive Species Management.

Its mission is to raise the next generation of environmental stewards. That interest could grow into a profession of studying and/or protecting the environment. For some students, WHIRL is a way to dip their toes into the natural world in a serious manner and to explore its possibilities. For Meadow, the program was an eye-opener, even with her interest in nature.

Meadow, 15, who was one of four WHIRL students who attended Friday's graduation, said her mom signed her up for the program.

"I was absolutely thrilled when I found out I could get to do this," Meadow said. "It's amazing. I love nature. We have woods in our backyard. I'll go out there and just sit there for a while, sometimes read."

Meadow, who will enter 10th grade this fall at Carthage Central School District, joined fellow WHIRL students in the five-week/two-day summer program doing activities such as water sampling and searching for aquatic invasive species. But the student, who took several questions from the public at a table set up at the boat launch, is one of the WHIRL participants who also netted a bonus benefit.

"It was also to figure out maybe we'd want to do this for a living, with the different jobs associated with the work force," she said. "I had no idea about some of the jobs associated with this program. It's been incredible to learn, and to become a better person learning about different jobs out there in the world. There's actually some jobs that haven't been invented for us. Getting to learn about the ones available now has been amazing."

The nine other students in the 2002 WHIRL program, and their school districts:

- Ila Williamson, Cecilia Stewart, Azlie Stewart and Kendeall Fernandez, all from Carthage Central
- Henry P. Brennan, Lyme Central
- T'Kai Tsuji, home-schooled



Henry P. Brennan, 15, left, shares information about his project at the WHIRL community outreach event and graduation ceremony held at the Millsite Lake boat launch area in Redwood. Kara Dryl/Watertown Daily Times

- Ava Mason and Nathan Taylor Mason, Indian River Central
- Elijah Flansburg, Lowville Academy.

At Friday's ceremony, Henry, 15, shared information on invasive species and critters found in the Indian River lakes and the streams that feed it. He'll be a sophomore this year at Lyme Central and said he hopes to do another WHIRL program next summer.

"I wanted to learn a bit more about science and also like nature, so I thought I'd do it," Henry said.

Among the activities he found educational was testing for water quality.

"It was just interesting to see what was in everything," he said. "I didn't know how much was behind everything."

The WHIRL instructors volunteered their time. The seven instructors for 2022:

- Michael Lovegreen, retired Soil & Water Conservation District director.
- Megan Pistolese, outreach coordinator at St. Lawrence Eastern Lake Ontario Partnership for Regional Invasive Species Management.
- Robert Smith, terrestrial restoration and resiliency coordinator at SLELO Prism.
- Sarah Trick, environmental resource specialist at Jefferson County Soil and Water Conservation District.
- Ryan Elliott from the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation.
- Mathew H. Webber,

Cazenovia, who has spent decades in various conservation organizations including president of the Central New York Izaak Walton League of America.

■ Thomas C. Hughes, from NYS Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation and natural resource steward biologist for the Central and Finger Lakes regions. He's also program manager of FORCES — Friends of Recreation, Conservation and Environmental Stewardship.

## A KEY PATHWAY

"These kind of programs are a great opportunity to capture the younger audience and potentially pathway them through, from high school so while they're in college they can come to work with us in the field and then, maybe ideally, for some of them, they can go and have careers in state parks, the DEC, land trusts, conservancies — wherever they feel," said Mr. Hughes, also a WHIRL co-founder.

Growing up, Mr. Webber spent time at his family's camp on Butterfield Lake. Now he has a camp on Mud Lake. He's also one of the three WHIRL program co-founders who worked with James "Wylie" Huffman III, executive director of IRLC, and Mr. Hughes to create it.

An important task that students performed, Mr. Webber said, was chemical and biological testing of streams that feed the Indian River Lakes. The Indian River Lakes

system, located on the St. Lawrence River plain in Jefferson and St. Lawrence counties, consists of 18 lakes. Biodiversity is key to the health of the waterways, he said, and something he stresses to students.

"From my perspective, the biological component, the critters that are in the streams, are a better indicator," he said. "Because when we do chemistry, you are taking a sample of this moment today. It doesn't mean there wasn't an oil spill or something last week or year. That water may be long gone and the chemistry today is fine."

But Mr. Webber said that when water bodies can support colonies of insects such as crane flies year to year, it can be a good indicator of excellent water quality.

"I always tell people your lakes are only as clean as the

streams you feed it," Mr. Webber said.

He put together large biological and chemical test charts for WHIRL students, which were on display Friday.

"Sometimes, you'll find real good readings on the chemistry and some key critters in the stream are not there," Mr. Webber said. "That tells you something happened in the last year or two."

More than

## MORE THAN SUMMERS

Mr. Huffman said the WHIRL program extends beyond the five-week summer program. For example, last year, Clarkson University, Potsdam, began a partnership with the conservancy.

Clarkson assistant professor of mathematics Diana T. White worked to expand Project WHIRL in summer 2021 to include a for-credit track, where high school students worked on activities involving lake surveying, application of mathematical modeling to invasive species biocontrol, and experiential field trips to the Thousand Island Biological Station operated by SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry.

A Eurasian watermilfoil mitigation study was also performed by students. Ms. White worked with high school teacher Andrea Inserra of the Indian River High School to develop the summer curriculum and students obtained high school credit in earth science.

"The interns that Clarkson used last year were actually WHIRL graduates from our first program in 2019 when we kicked WHIRL off," Mr. Huffman said.

Students in the Ogdensburg

Free Academy District became involved in the Clarkson WHIRL partnership as a pilot program this past school year and received credit. He added that IRCS wasn't able to participate this year due to a lack of teachers. Also, he noted that Clarkson biology professor and chairman Michael R. Twiss did a two-day road salt study concerning the effects on runoff for this year's summer WHIRL students.

According to a 2021 Clarkson news release, its team was working to expand Project WHIRL to more schools throughout counties bordering the St. Lawrence River and its tributaries.

"Clarkson brings in this expertise from the college level," Mr. Huffman said. "At the conservancy, we have a great grasp on the conditions in our lakes regarding the challenges of invasive species, and the high schools are bringing in the kids, kind of the workforce, that the college needs to collect the data. The conservancy kind of ties it all together."

Elliott Hillback Jr., former board chairman of the Indian River Lakes Conservancy, current board member and a co-founder of the nonprofit, was mingling with volunteers, students and guests at Friday's graduation. He has a grand vision for the WHIRL program.

"Our goal, working together, is every school from Clay to all the way to Massena will adopt this program and get it into their schools," he said. "We're all working together now to see if we can raise some money, raise support."

"That's something definitely to dream of," Mr. Huffman said. "We're definitely taking the first steps. The challenge is probably funding and capacity for summer programs."

## SATURDAY CELEBRATION

The IRLC protects 2,500 acres of land and stewards more than 20 miles of public trails.

From 5:30 to 9 p.m. Saturday, IRLC will host its annual "Celebrate the Lakes" at the Thousand Islands Winery, 43298 Seaway Ave., Alexandria Bay. The fundraiser will feature live music by Funkadelphia, wine, and a live and a silent auction. Dinner will be provided by Dinosaur BBQ. Tickets are \$60 per individual. For more info on the event and the organization, go to indianriverlakes.org.



An algal bloom art piece by WHIRL graduate Ella M. Williamson, 15, meant to demonstrate the harm caused by runoff and high temperatures was displayed at the graduation ceremony and community outreach event. Kara Dryl/Watertown Daily Times