

**2017 Hiram M. Chittenden Award
for Interpretive Excellence**

NOMINEE: Cassie L. Magsig

POSITION TITLE: Natural Resources Specialist

SERIES AND GRADE: GS- 0401- 09/05

ORGANIZATION: CEMVS-OD-B

LOCATION: Rend Lake Project Office
St. Louis District

ADDRESS: 11981 Rend City Rd.
Benton, IL 62812

POINT OF CONTACT: Kevin. A Curran
Operations Manager
618-724-2493

Executive Summary

The Rend Lake Project Office, St. Louis District is proud to nominate Natural Resource Specialist Cassie Magsig for the 2017 Hiram M. Chittenden Award for Interpretive Excellence. Cassie's passion for her community, loyalty to her work, and drive to help others has allowed her to succeed in her efforts to create new, long lasting partnerships; increase volunteer involvement; and keeping visitors coming back to Rend Lake time and time again.

Cassie has been able to focus her talents strictly in the Interpretive Services and Outreach Department during the past three years, and in 2016, her motivation and abilities to accomplish tasks for the benefit of Rend Lake and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers as a whole have never been more evident. In 2016, Cassie served as assistant volunteer coordinator and oversaw 37 formal and informal partnerships, worked with 562 volunteers, coordinated and facilitated the presentation of 456 educational programs and special events, and submitted her second successful application into the Handshake Partnership Program. Cassie deserves this prestigious award for her consistent efforts to connect people with the lake, for being proactive for our future, providing top-notch service, and for creating long-lasting relationships and beneficial partnerships.

Mrs. Magsig never settles with "how things have always been done" and continues to improve old ways, activate new, beneficial projects, and create and foster meaningful relationships with our partners, visitors, and stakeholders.

Creativity and Originality

Cassie's ability to communicate the needs of the lake is extremely unique and is only one of the reasons she is so successful at developing and maintaining new partnerships. In 2016, Cassie was able to successfully coordinate two new Handshake Partnership projects. As part of the first project Cassie brought 8 local union organizations together and they each became first time partners with Rend Lake Project. She worked with them to coordinate the demolition of two hazardous pavilions followed by the construction of one new, ADA accessible pavilion. Cassie's work on the pavilion project generated 36 volunteers who provided over \$65K in leveraged funding and will undoubtedly lead to long-lasting partnerships and future projects with Rend Lake Project. Also in 2016, Rend Lake was announced as the recipient of \$20K in Handshake Partnership funds to construct an ADA accessible trail with accessible fishing platforms. Cassie worked tirelessly to secure this funding and coordinate the 8 partner organizations. When completed, the trail will also include demonstration pollinator prairies and new interpretive signage around an existing pond located directly across from the Rend Lake Visitor Center. The trail building project features the return of three partnerships that Cassie developed during the construction of the new pavilion. She also worked to include new partnerships and has developed solid relationships with the Agricultural Department from Rend Lake College, a local garden club, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, the Illinois Native Plant Society, and the University of Illinois. Cassie's positive attitude and openness with partners keeps them willing to return for future projects.

Cassie rose to the challenge of seeking this invaluable funding to benefit the missions of the Rend Lake Project and every one of the visitors to the project. After the funding was secured, Cassie then had the privilege of promoting this partnership project through local media. She was able to communicate to the public a better understanding and appreciation for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and each and every one of the partners involved.

Cassie was also able to use her talents of communication and ability to execute projects to create and maintain a Memorandum of Understanding between the Rend Lake Project USACE, the Master Gardener Program managed by the University of IL, and a local garden club. This partnership is designed to help create, manage, and educate the public about Rend Lake's Pollinator Demonstration Garden located at the Rend Lake Visitor Center. The volunteer members worked over 200 hours in 2016 providing over \$5k in leveraged funding to make the Pollinator Demonstration Garden a place to educate visitors about the importance of native plants and pollinators and to inspire them to plant a native garden of their own. The Master Gardeners have held classes at the Rend Lake Visitor Center using the garden as demonstration and performed free programming during both Rend Lake's Annual Earth Day event and Environmental Science Series. Cassie's management of this partnership has made a countless number of visitors aware of what the project offers and has brought volunteers in from assisting in the garden who also want to volunteer operating the Visitor Center. This partnership has also brought the Rend Lake Project closer to its goal of creating an extremely active Cooperating Association. Cassie's push for greatness and constant interaction with the volunteers and partners is why Rend Lake's leverage funding has increased from \$698K in 2014 to \$1 million in 2016 with volunteer contributions increasing from \$217K in 2014 to \$362K in 2016.

To further enhance the Pollinator Demonstration Garden, Cassie was once again given the opportunity to use her talents and creativity in 2016 to develop interpretive signage that stresses the importance of native plants and unique pollinators that visitors may find when touring the garden. She did not want the signs to take away from the natural beauty of the garden and wanted the signs to provide more purpose than information. She researched and designed the signs to be placed on existing structures including the stream bridges and to wrap around posts that would hold structures such as bat and butterfly homes and hummingbird nesting boxes. This signage is essential to continue the great educational programming that the garden provides and to educate visitors when taking a non-guided tour.

Cassie also helped coordinate and record a video that provided a unique look into the St. Louis District O-Plan and how she plays a role in bringing the O-Plan to life. The video was then shared with all St. Louis District employees. During this time, Cassie was also challenged to quickly write and record a

creative way to share a water safety message. With the help from her co-worker, a water safety rap song came to life, was recorded, and is being made available for use to St. Louis District employees.

Made a Positive Experience for Visitors

Cassie is driven by people. She is driven to resolve their issues, driven to meet new people and to find a connection with them and help them to connect to the lake. She is driven to help them learn something new. She believes that visitors are the future of the lake and that without getting to know them on a personal level and discovering what's important to them, that we will never have a successful future. Cassie maintains a phenomenal level of service to the lake's visitors and feels that it is necessary to continue implementing new ideas and tools into her programming. Cassie maintains the Rend Lake Visitor Center at a level that is top-notch and continues to find ways to incorporate new exhibits and hands-on activities that entice visitors to return. One of the most popular examples of environmental programming that is presented by the Rend Lake staff is the topic of reptiles. After presenting the program about reptiles a few times, she realized that several of the participants already knew the names of many of the common snakes found around Rend Lake. She set out to re-vamp the program so that she could achieve her goal of teaching her audience something new. She began acquiring new snakes that needed homes and now has a wider variety species to rotate and present. She also acquired a common snapping turtle and an alligator snapping turtle to house at the Visitor Center and use for programs. This allows her to provide extensive reptile programming, provide the public with real species to compare, and examples of endangered species to educate the public about the importance of their protection. This dedication to provide new and exciting material is why our programming and event numbers have increased from 287 in 2014 to 456 programs in 2016. The majority of the programs fulfill the STEM initiative and Cassie believes that providing top-notch ranger and volunteer led programming now, is what will maintain the existence of the Interpretive Services and Outreach Program in the future.

In 2016, Cassie also assisted with the replacement of an unused exhibit with a fun hands-on exhibit about the mammals of Illinois. This exhibit was created solely by Cassie and demonstrates how to look at the different features of mammals to know if they are a predator or prey, what they eat, and where they live. Cassie also worked closely with the Rend Lake Area Tourism Council to update council members on lake happenings and promotional events. This council is a necessity for promotion of the Rend Lake USACE presentations and events and provided the Rend Lake area with over \$89K in free programming in 2016.

Cassie is also instrumental in coordinating and assisting with all special events at Rend Lake including the Annual Rend Lake Earth Day event, the Annual Rend Lake Beach Blast, the Environmental Science Series (ESS), and the Annual Rend Lake National Public Lands Day. Once again, Cassie never settles for low attendance and continuing to operate as usual. Over the past three years, Cassie has increased the attendance of the Earth Day event from 600 to 1200 registered students through community outreach and by meeting the needs of the teachers without increasing budget costs. She also takes requests for the ESS programs and meets the needs of the public. This series of programs is presented every Saturday from Memorial Day weekend through Labor Day weekend. Many of the ESS presentations have had to expand from 2 showings per day to 3 to accommodate the amount of participants. She has assisted with the coordination of Rend Lake's 30th Annual National Public Land's Day in which 300 volunteers removed litter from several miles of Rend Lake's roadways and trails and increased Rend Lake's FY 16 leveraged funding by \$30K.

Enhancing the Public's Understanding of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Site

As mentioned above, Cassie is constantly recognized for her drive for meeting new people and her need to assist them. She felt that although she was doing the best she could and was continuously learning to better equip herself when promoting the lake that she needed to know more to better promote the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. She then applied for the FY17 Leadership Development Program in the St. Louis District and was accepted. Although she acquired more work on top of her already full load, she felt she was gaining the necessary knowledge needed to better promote the work and in the long run, the future of the USACE. Her talent for communication and encouragement has motivated others to apply for the program, learn more about themselves, and has given her the opportunity to teach others about the contributions of the USACE.

Cassie also understands the importance of recognizing those who are providing free services for the betterment of Rend Lake. Sending out news releases, holding recognition ceremonies, and sharing "good stories" on social media can make all the difference in retaining volunteers and recruiting new volunteers. These volunteers typically begin their services doing small jobs such as cleaning the visitor center, filling brochure racks, and pulling weeds. With Cassie's work to foster these relationships, these jobs quickly transition to more important jobs including operation of the visitor center, management of the campgrounds, and even presentation of free programming.

Cassie knows that one of the most important messages, yet one of the most challenging subjects to interpret is public safety. Cassie is passionate about water safety and understands why it is so important that the public receives the message of water safety often. Cassie is also a believer in keeping the message in line with the times and changing up the way the information is presented often so that the audience continues to listen. For several years, the Rend Lake Interpretive Services staff had utilized Seamoor the Water Safety Serpent to present the message of water safety. Cassie thought that the students needed a new face to see and was approved to purchase a Bobber the Water Safety Dog costume. She wrote the script implementing Bobber and presented a fun message of water safety at 23 schools to over 2,800 students during the month of April 2016 for Rend Lake's water safety month. The programming was a hit, and Bobber was used during many weekend beach programs including Rend Lake's Annual Beach Blast which kicks off the summer with fun and games that teach participants how to properly wear a life jacket, how to recognize someone struggling in the water, and the steps to take to save someone struggling in the water. The event is always well attended, and despite the poor weather conditions in 2016, there were still 114 participants.

In 2016, Cassie also renewed the Water Safety Campaign agreement that she created in 2015 in which Rend Lake USACE partnered with a local restaurant and a local catfish bait supplier to reward those who are "caught" wearing their life jackets. During boat patrols, rangers award adults they "catch" with a free drink insulator adorned with water safety messages, a coupon for a free slice of pie from the local restaurant, and a free sample of catfish bait. Cassie wanted to provide items that would promote life jacket wearing by both the recreational boater and the fishermen. Over 80 awards were distributed during the 2016 boat patrols.

Also in 2016, Cassie partnered for the first time with five local Pizza Hut restaurants to place water safety stickers on all the pizza boxes purchased on the day of the Super Bowl. Nearly 1,000 water safety message stickers were distributed that day to serve as a reminder to make water safety a "Pizza" their life. The stickers also provided them with an eligible number and directed them to the Rend Lake Project Facebook page to enter their number in our FB contest. Execution of new ideas like the ones mentioned is how Cassie continues to grow Rend Lake's Facebook followers, visitation, and keep her audience interested and coming back time and time again.

It is obvious that Cassie Magsig deserves this prestigious award for her consistent efforts to connect people with the lake, for being proactive for our future, providing top-notch service, and for creating long-lasting relationships and beneficial partnerships.

Citation

The 2017 Hiram M. Chittenden Award for Interpretive Excellence is presented to:

Natural Resource Specialist, Cassie Magsig,
of the Rend Lake Project Office, St. Louis District

For her commitment, innovation, and sincere love for educating the community and all visitors that come to Rend Lake. Her talent for communication and encouragement enables her to improve the way in which we interact with our visitors, volunteers, and partners. She shines a new light on the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Through her efforts, people are making it their personal mission to actively sustain our natural and cultural resources for future generations.

Supporting Attachments:



Cassie before one of the Bobber the Water Safety Dog Programs at a local school during "Water Safety Month".



Cassie presenting reptiles during a field trip to the Rend Lake Visitor Center.



Cassie presenting a Reptile Program to sixth graders at Rend Lake's Annual Earth Day Event.



MOU signing for the Pollinator Demonstration Garden.



Photo taken in the Garden after the signing.



Cassie, along with co-worker Kelsey Daniels, performing their creative water safety rap to promote the St. Louis district O-Plan.