

2020 Hiram M. Chittenden Award For Interpretive Excellence

NOMINEE: Amanda Kruse

POSITION TITLE: Natural Resource Specialist

SERIES AND GRADE: GS-0401-12

ORGANIZATION: CEMVS-OD-T

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Executive Summary

The St. Louis District is proud to nominate Ms. Amanda Kruse for the 2020 Hiram M. Chittenden Award for Interpretive Excellence. She has an impressive interpretive and outreach career, highlighted by her many accomplishments in 2019 as the Lead Ranger for the Interpretive Services and Outreach Program (ISOP) at Carlyle Lake. Ms. Kruse's passion and dedication to interpretive services is evident in her commitment to creating unique and diverse ways of communicating the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) missions. Her infectious enthusiasm and positive attitude inspires visitors to learn more about Carlyle Lake, the St. Louis District, and USACE.

As the Lead ISOP Ranger for Carlyle Lake, which has over three-million visitors annually, Ms. Kruse worked diligently to provide an extraordinary range of programs, special events, partner connections, and other interpretive projects. In 2019 alone, she coordinated more than 245 interpretive and outreach programs reaching more than 11,000 participants. Ms. Kruse led the Carlyle Lake Water Safety Program which provided over 140 programs, with more than 15,000 direct interpretive contacts.

A force for change, in 2019 Ms. Kruse implemented numerous new programs, partnerships, events, and projects to accomplish the interpretive and outreach goals at Carlyle Lake. These included developing Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Mathematics (STEAM) programs with local schools and organizations, upgrades to the Carlyle Lake Visitor Center, and installation of a new amphitheater at Dam West Campground. She also coordinated the implementation of a variety of first-time special events including the "first in the nation" U.S. Army Reserves Expo, Capabilities Exercise (CAPEX) Triathlon, and Carlyle Lake Carpfest.

A true team player, Ms. Kruse involves the entire Carlyle Lake staff in interpretive events and programs and mentors members of the team. She is always willing to help someone with a computer issue, brainstorm new ideas, or work through a personal issue. Amanda is ready and willing to lend a hand to help a team member. She encourages teammates to try new projects and continue to learn and develop their skills.

Ms. Kruse is truly an outstanding ambassador and communicator for USACE. She has held a variety of positions since starting her career with the Corps as a college intern and each one had one thing in common, educational outreach. From the start, Ms. Kruse knew her strengths in communication and has used them to support USACE missions. Amanda recently started a new position, true to her strengths, in the St. Louis District Operations Technical and Policy Branch as the ISOP Lead for the entire St. Louis District. This position will allow her the opportunity to expand her passion and enthusiasm for the Corps of Engineers Interpretive Services and Outreach Program even further.

Amanda Kruse is truly deserving of this award. Interpretation is her passion and this past year included several defining moments and accomplishments in her career. It is because of her innovation, drive, and commitment to the interpretive services and outreach program that makes her worthy of receiving such a prestigious award.

Creativity and Originality

Amanda's creativity and originality can be seen in each and every program and partnership she develops. She utilizes new techniques, technology, and ideas to connect with her audience and promote the Corps' missions. From the start of her career in 2009, she has always looked to develop unique educational programs and outreach opportunities. Examples of her creativity include original interpretive programs called "Are You Smarter than a Park Ranger" and "Stinky and the Bandit" and the development of Snapchat filters to promote water safety. Even monthly team safety meetings feature trivia games and scavenger hunts that connect to the audience and educate them in fun ways. Ms. Kruse uses creative interpretative techniques that effectively capture all her audiences.

Since 2011, the Carlyle Lake Water Safety Team has been presenting high school water safety spring break programming to students in their local area. The goal of these programs is to remind students to always be safe when in, on, or near the water. In 2019, Ms. Kruse combined her creativity with resources provided by the HQUSACE National Water Safety Program to create the Water Safety Crime Scene Investigation (CSI) interpretive program. Using the model of a crime scene investigation, the program has students investigate a series of clues from a water-related accident. The program gives students a much different perspective on water safety than traditional methods and emphasizes the importance of wearing a life jacket. The Water Safety CSI program provides a unique opportunity for rangers to really engage with students and talk to them about some of the real consequences associated with not wearing a life jacket. Ms. Kruse's program was successfully presented at four local high schools reaching over 1,400 students and has also been used for adult, water safety programs with more than 500 contacts. In addition, this unique program has been presented at the St. Louis District Water Safety Meeting and is being added to the Boating and Water Safety Resource Guide update that will be distributed Corps-wide. A number of interpreters at Corps lakes have already started presenting this exceptional and impactful program.

Social media has been a great benefit to so many USACE lake and river projects and with Ms. Kruse's ingenuity, Carlyle Lake's social media expanded. Carlyle Lake already had a very successful Facebook presence, but Ms. Kruse wanted to extend that to other platforms, including Snapchat. She created multiple Snapchat filters that highlighted special events at the lake and featured water safety messaging. Utilizing a popular social media platform, Ms. Kruse was able to promote water safety to one of the Corps most at-risk groups, teenagers. Amanda created filters, with water safety messages, for five different special events. These filters quickly and efficiently spread the Corps water safety message with more than 33,000 visitors viewing them.

Ms. Kruse also utilized creative partnerships to support USACE missions. She established a Challenge Partnership Agreement with Print Craze, a local printing company, to develop and produce new safety billboards. Each billboard was designed, free of charge, and features a different water or hunting safety message. Ms. Kruse also coordinated a Memorandum of Understanding with Bayer U.S. to work collaboratively in developing, organizing, and implementing programs and activities to educate the public and support the conservation and restoration of pollinator habitat and species.

Volunteers are vital to USACE, Carlyle Lake, and Ms. Kruse. From carving pumpkins for the Carlyle Lake Haunted Trail to spreading mulch and removing invasive species on nature trails, Carlyle Lake volunteers would not stop until the job was done and Ms. Kruse works right alongside them. Her positive spirit keeps volunteers motivated and excited about the work they

are doing. In all, Carlyle Lake had more than 135 volunteers work more than 5,000 hours in 2019 resulting in a total value of more than \$130,000.

Made a Positive Experience for Visitors

One of the most unique partnerships and events that Ms. Kruse facilitated was with the U.S. Army Reserves. Working with multiple Reserve soldiers and units, Ms. Kruse helped promote, organize, coordinate, and implement the Nation's first U.S. Army Reserves Expo. The expo included a live training exercise showcasing the capabilities of reserve units, ROTC cadets, and local community partners. It took a tremendous amount of support from the Carlyle Lake team, the City of Carlyle, and the Clinton County Sheriff's Department to host this event. With Ms. Kruse leading the charge, the event was successfully carried out smoothly and safely. More than 600 spectators viewed the historical event and cheered on our Nation's soldiers. This event highlighted the missions of Carlyle Lake and the Corps of Engineers, but more importantly, it allowed visitors to see our Nation's heroes in action. It was an incredible event and experience for everyone that was involved and could not have taken place without Ms. Kruse's passion and dedication.

Amanda also worked tirelessly to plan and coordinate the MSE Racing CAPEX Triathlon. The event had 300 spectators and 500 athletes that participated in the swim, bike, and run courses. One of the most unique and challenging aspects of the triathlon was the start. Participants were loaded onto a floating platform pushed with a pontoon boat and taken out to the starting point. Concerned about the safety of the participants, Ms. Kruse worked with MSE Racing to ensure each and every participant on board the platform wore a life jacket. After the event, MSE Racing donated 50 lifejackets to the Carlyle Lake Life Jacket Loaner Program. It was a one-of-a-kind recreational experience coordinated and developed with the partnerships Ms. Kruse established.

In 2019, with Amanda as the lead for the Carlyle Lake Water Safety Program, the program partnered with more than 70 local business in support of the USACE water safety mission. Partners posted water safety messages on electronic reader boards, sponsored the "I Got Caught Wearing my Life Jacket at Carlyle Lake" t-shirt campaign, displayed water safety posters, coasters, and stickers on their products and used water safety bags for their customers. In addition, Ms. Kruse was part of a weekly local radio program segment that provided an update on events at Carlyle Lake and discussed topics of interest including the purposes of Carlyle Lake, recreational opportunities, and general safety. Each week the program concluded with a Carlyle Lake water safety trivia question. In total, Ms. Kruse's efforts led to more than \$107,000 leveraged dollars in support of water safety initiatives to help keep visitors safe.

Ms. Kruse spearheaded many other special events at Carlyle Lake throughout the year including: *All About Eagles* – partnering with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) and the Case-Halstead Public Library more than 150 visitors enjoyed a close-up encounter with a live bald eagle, *Polar Plunge* – over 600 visitors raised more than \$60,000 to benefit the Special Olympics, *Celebrate the Earth* – an annual event with more than 3,500 students learning about environmental education, *Illinois High School Association (IHSA) Bass State Fishing Finals* – Over 300 high school students from across the state of Illinois participate in this annual event to crown the IHSA Bass Fishing Champion.

Amanda also led the charge to update almost every aspect of the Carlyle Lake Visitor Center. Furniture and lighting were replaced. Old exhibits were given a modern refresh and three new interpretive displays were completed. These exhibits focused on environmental stewardship

and habitat conservation for the plants and animals found at Carlyle Lake. With the visitor center complete, Ms. Kruse set her sights on the West Bay Amphitheater located in Dam West Campground, the most popular campground at Carlyle Lake. Ms. Kruse renovated the entire amphitheater. Replacing the outdated and inaccessible amphitheater with a clean, modern, comfortable, and universally accessible amphitheater that every visitor could enjoy.

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

In 2019, Ms. Kruse established a partnership with Centralia Junior High School (CJHS) and formed the CJHS STEAM Program. The goal of the program was to build a relationship between local students and the Corps of Engineers and increase students' interest in the Corps and STEAM-related curriculum and career fields. Each month, Park Rangers explored a different STEAM topic that focused on a USACE mission to approximately 120 fifth grade students. Working closely with the CJHS faculty, Ms. Kruse and the Carlyle ISOP team tailored the educational programs to what students were currently studying. CJHS has a high population of disadvantaged students and is located in a low income area. Many of the students in this program had never had any interaction with USACE or the opportunity to learn more about STEAM subjects. Ms. Kruse's development of this program has established a strong partnership and has introduced students to USACE missions and STEAM-related career opportunities.

Amanda didn't stop with the partnership with CJHS. She also partnered with the Case-Halstead Library and City of Carlyle to be part of their 2019 Summer Camps including their weekly STEAM Camp. Summer Camp Programs highlighted the USACE missions including flood risk management (dam tours), environmental stewardship (snake program), recreation, and water safety. For the STEAM camps, Ms. Kruse organized "Who Dirtied the Water?" a watershed-based interpretive program, as well as camper programs for geocaching to utilize technology, field sketching, and engineering. Amanda arranged for the campers to have a field trip to Carlyle Lake. The field trip included a tour of the Carlyle Lake Main Dam, life jacket engineering, and building a dam out of Legos. With these programs Ms. Kruse not only promoted USACE missions, she also helped to strengthen a vital partnership with the local community.

Invasive species are not something typically celebrated, but Ms. Kruse organized "Carpfest 2019," a positive educational event highlighting the Asian Carp, an invasive species found in the Kaskaskia River. Working with Carter's Fish Market of Champaign, Illinois, Ms. Kruse organized the event which gave visitors the opportunity to learn about the Asian Carp, why they are harmful to the environment, how they can help stop them, and how to properly clean and cook them. Visitors were even able to try samples of cooked Asian Carp. This event not only provided a unique experience for visitors, it has also formed a relationship between Carter's Fish Market and Carlyle Lake for future commercial fishing of Asian Carp. With this event, Ms. Kruse educated the public on invasive species and helped form a partnership that will restore the habitat for native species in the Kaskaskia River.

Ms. Kruse also made a huge impact with the Every Kid Outdoors Program (formerly Every Kid in a Park). Ms. Kruse formed a partnership with the National Park Service, and utilized the annual Celebrate the Earth event to educate 4th graders about environmental stewardship, federal lands, and recreational opportunities available to them. In 2018, Carlyle Lake gave out only two EKIP passes. With Ms. Kruse's support and leadership, Carlyle Lake gave out 499 EKIP passes in 2019.

Citation

The 2020 Hiram M. Chittenden Award for Interpretive Excellence is presented to:

Natural Resource Specialist, Ms. Amanda Kruse,
of the St. Louis District

In recognition for Ms. Kruse's outstanding service, professionalism, enthusiasm, and commitment to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) interpretative services and outreach program. For her exemplary work in building trusted relationships with teammates, partners, and visitors to accomplish USACE missions and connect people to their natural resources. She has gone above and beyond her regular duties to create unique experiences that enhance visitor safety, knowledge, and recreational enjoyment. Her outstanding accomplishments in interpretation and outreach are highly deserving of the 2020 Hiram M. Chittenden Award for Interpretive Excellence.

Supporting Attachments

- 1) Amanda Kruse donning an oversized life jacket to emphasize sizing it right!
- 2) Presenting high school water safety CSI programs.
- 3) Ms. Kruse with the 2019 “I Got Caught Wearing my Life Jacket at Carlyle Lake” campaign sponsors.



- 1) Amanda introducing students to a new friend.
- 2) News article about the partnership between the Corps, Case-Halstead Library, and City of Carlyle for summer and STEAM camps.
- 3) STEAM campers making and showing off their engineered life jackets.
- 4) Keeping up with the trends, Ms. Kruse created a Snapchat filter for the IHSA State Bass Fishing Finals including a water safety message.



2 Corps of Engineers hosting fishing program Friday

Corps, city of Carlyle have collaborated on summer camp series

BY BRYAN HUNT
SENTINEL NEWS STAFF

CARLYLE — Interesting things are happening at Carlyle Lake, and one of them is coming up in a day.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, in cooperation with the city of Carlyle, will be staging the second of its summer camp programs Friday, simply titled "Fishing."

Those taking part are to meet at Dam West Shelter 2 off of Lake Road, near the shower building, just before 10 a.m. Friday and then they will make the short walk down to Willow Pond with Corps personnel.

"You can come out, learn some fishing skills, and put those skills to the test," said Amanda Kruse, a resource naturalist with the Corps on Wednesday.

"Once we get everybody together, we will all walk over as a group," Willow Pond is located just south of the Visitors Center.

The Corps will have bait on hand but Kruse said if participants can bring fishing poles — the Corps may have a couple that people can borrow — that would be good.

Anybody can take part in the fishing event, Kruse said. "We're more than happy to help anybody that's there."

The opening event, on July 19, was macro netting with park ranger Paige Laughhunn, and Kruse, who was there briefly. Kruse mentioned that someone did indeed catch a fish. (It was Wyatt Anderson, 9, of Carlyle.)

There are two more outings in the series: Aug. 2 is "Renewable or Not?" on the life cycle of resources used every day; and on Aug. 9 Corps rangers will conduct a scavenger hunt. And the programs are free and open to the public.

Carlyle Lake's pool level is at 449.52 feet and below what is considered flood stage. "So boat ramps are open, beaches are open, campsites are open. We're basically back in action," said Kruse of the facilities that are available.

The record level at the lake was 459.80 reached on May 18, 2002.

Kayaking is going over well at Carlyle Lake, too, according to Corps park ranger Kim Hammel. She said it is pretty easy to get into.

One of the pluses, over boating in regular watercraft, is that kayaks allow you to get into the coves of the lake that you wouldn't ordinarily have access to.

Hammel said it was about five or six years ago, it was noticed that kayaks "kept rolling in to Carlyle Lake." The thought turned to having areas specifically to accommodate kayakers.

Please see **Fishing**, Page 6A



4

**IHSA STATE BASS
FISHING FINALS
-2019-
ALWAYS WEAR A LIFE JACKET**

- 1) Water safety has no season. Ms. Kruse decorated a water safety tree for the Holidays.
- 2) News article about the Nation's first Army Reserve Expo.
- 3) YMCA camp participants.
- 4) Ms. Kruse with Reserve soldiers participating in the U.S. Army Reserve Expo.
- 5) CJHS STEAM program participants building their own Lego dam.
- 6) CAPEX triathlon participants wearing their life jackets.

