

**The Chief of Engineers Annual Natural Resources Management Awards**

**2018 HIRAM M. CHITTENDEN  
AWARD FOR INTERPRETIVE EXCELLENCE  
NOMINATION**

**Amber C Tilton  
Park Ranger, GS-0025-09**

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## Executive Summary

Amber Tilton has been an interpretive park ranger for the Corps for 14 years. Since her arrival at The Dalles Lock and Dam, she has made tremendous impacts to a once struggling interpretation program. Her interpretation skills are exceptional and her programs have become a sought after commodity by partners, schools, and visitors; locally and regionally. Amber takes initiative to develop these relationships, programs, special events and activities. She is an asset to our team, providing quality customer service and consistently utilizing Tilden's principles of interpretation to promote understanding and appreciation of Corps missions. Thanks to Amber, we now have a sustainable interpretive program that continues to grow as she builds thriving partnerships with multiple federal, state and local agencies. In 2018, her efforts led to the following accomplishments:

- 1,600 people attended The Dalles Dam annual Eagle Watch (highest attended to date).
- Extended winter hours and interpretive services at our visitor center focusing on eagles.
- A new interpretive film (valued at approx. \$10k) developed by partners at no cost to the Corps, about eagles and environmental stewardship which now plays in our theater.
- A new bus tour program that cost shares among community partners (who contributed \$5k) to transport visitors to The Dalles Lock and Dam for interpretive tours.
- Life jacket donations (valued at approx. \$3k) to all of Portland Districts 22 loaner boards.
- 3 new Lewis and Clark interpretive signs for our parks (donated by NPS, value of \$2k)
- She nominated and provided Volunteer Coins of Excellence from the Corps Foundation to 7 of our local partners and volunteers.
- Media tours conducted with multiple agencies to promote water safety on television and radio outlets in the Portland Metro Area and surrounding communities.
- She wrote an article about the Corps water safety campaign that reached local, national and global audiences.
- She designed an interpretive water safety poster that the National Water Safety Team decided to print and make available in their product catalog for Corps rangers nationally.
- 4,721 direct interpretive contacts in 2018 and 1,370 of those were water safety contacts.

Amber is passionate and committed to interpretation, especially water safety. She serves on water safety committees at the Project, District, Division levels and is currently on the National Water Safety Team. She is a subject matter expert in the field of interpretation and water safety and is consistently asked to present at high level platforms such as the 2018 National Association for Interpretation's National Conference, ranger workshops and trainings, and even appearing in an Oregon Public Broadcast production and a StemPunx film.

As 1 of 3 full time rangers, there is an array of Visitor Assistance and Recreation Program duties that are also a priority. Amber manages to balance all of these and has excelled in creating effective interpretation instead of excessive interpretation. Amber's "can do" attitude is an asset to the Corps. Her ability to provide leadership in managing our permanent, seasonal and volunteer staffs as she trains, mentors and coaches them on how to provide quality interpretation to the public is critical.

Amber is highly deserving of the Hiram M. Chittenden Award for Interpretive Excellence. Her selfless service to the Corps of Engineers, The Dalles Lock and Dam and our visitors has become a cornerstone to our Natural Resource Management Program goals and missions. With Amber's leadership The Dalles interpretative program will continue to successfully impact our visitors and surrounding communities in a positive manner.

## **Creativity and Originality**

Amber's success stems from her passion for interpretation. She makes full use of all of the tools in her interpretation toolbox. She is dedicated to the Corps water safety mission and serves the agency at all levels. She is our Project Water Safety Coordinator and in the absence of our District coordinator, she cheerfully fills that role. For example, in 2018 the District lead was filling a six month CAP detail in Washington, D.C. so Amber filled her role and continues to support the District as their staff has been reduced. In 2018 she executed \$5,813.00 of District funds to support 5 different Projects with water safety billboards, pencils, Jr. Ranger badges, and water safety brochure distribution. She led the District water safety team meetings and updated our District Strategic Plan. Additionally, Amber volunteered to fill in as the Northwestern Division Public Safety coordinator until the position is filled permanently. Her role as Chairperson is to lead five Districts in a combined water safety effort to support field level interpretation. She compiles NWD water safety accomplishments in quarterly reports and shares best practices and lessons learned division wide and to senior leaders.

In addition, Amber serves on the National Water Safety Team as the NWD representative. One highlight of 2018 was her Seven Deadly Swims poster design. In response to a continued trend of swim related fatalities, Amber took the initiative to design this new interpretive media product that is now used nationally. This poster creatively uses interpretation to effectively communicate specific safety messages. The national team has made the poster available on-line at [https://www.usace.army.mil/Missions/Civil-Works/Recreation/Water-Safety/National-Water-Safety-Program/Campaign\\_Materials/](https://www.usace.army.mil/Missions/Civil-Works/Recreation/Water-Safety/National-Water-Safety-Program/Campaign_Materials/) and in their product catalog for anyone in the Corps to order.

In 2018, Amber wrote an article for the National Association for Interpretation's Legacy Magazine. The theme for that issue was Interpreting Death. Her article, titled: *Interpreting Death to Save Lives: A Matter of Life and Vest*, described interpretive techniques the Corps uses to implement its national water safety campaign. The editor of the article sent her high regards and it was highlighted as the first article appearing in the issue. As a result, she was asked to speak on a panel presentation about the Corps water safety campaign at the 2018 National Association for Interpretation Conference. The article also gained recognition from Professor Sam Ham, known as one of the "fathers of interpretation" who called her personally to compliment the article and inquire about Corps resources on water safety and how the agency uses interpretation in their campaign. He now uses Corps resources in his classroom instructions around the world. The International Heritage Interpretation Emagazine also highlighted Amber's article. This Emagazine is distributed internationally and reaches over 300,000 people in 60 countries. The Corps Foundation shared it with partners and in their newsletter. The article can be found on the Corps website at <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/296685/interpreting-death-save-lives-matter-life-and-vest>

In 2018, Amber's dedication to public safety resulted in three new life jacket loaner board installations (bringing Portland District's total to 25 – half of which Amber is solely responsible for). She creatively secured funding through partners for construction materials of the boards and reached out to The Dalles High School woodshop to have students build them. Twenty high school students participated in the project and learned about the importance of life jacket wear. Amber recruits other agencies to participate and implement their own life jacket loaner board programs. She provides them with the Corps Life Jacket Loaner Board program policy, connections to resources and strategic plans for implementation. For example, one of the 2018 loaner boards constructed was for a neighboring town's highly visited city swim beach.

Other Corps Districts and local agencies consistently reach out to Amber as a resource for interpretive tools and techniques. This is just another example of how she positively impacts our community.

### **Makes a Positive Experience for Visitors**

Amber's 'outside the box' mentality serves the Corps well and takes interpretive outreach to the next level. She is creative and effective in developing new programs and special events. Her thriftiness allows us to get the most "bang" for the buck because one of her greatest qualities is an ability to seize partnership opportunities when they present themselves. For example, she built from scratch an annual Eagle Watch event that draws thousands of visitors to our interpretive center. The event includes multiple partners, including other Corps Projects, federal agencies and non-profit organizations. Amber finds a role for everyone, coordinates live raptor demonstrations and interpretive programs for all ages, including an eagle costume for kids and interpretive displays that she created. Every year she adds a new interpretive aspect to the event to draw visitors back with something new. In 2018, the new aspect was to include and highlight local photography of bald eagles. Based on our visitor comment book and verbal feedback, people are coming from hundreds of miles away to our small community just for this winter recreational opportunity.

Over 1,600 people attend this one day special event; our highest visited event to date. To put that in perspective, visitation during our seasonal operation of the visitor center (May-Sept) is 13,000-15,000 annually. Based on Amber's effective community outreach, passion to meet demand and provide a niche winter recreational and interpretive experiences, we have extended our visitor center hours to include off season winter operations.

Amber engages the local radio and television stations to reach audiences outside the surrounding area who might otherwise have no contact with the Corps staff or missions. By doing interviews and films, such as the Grant's Getaway's KGW special and a StemPunx educational film, she has extended the Corps reach and interpretive education to a broader audience. These films now play in our visitor center theater where thousands of people a year will continue to see them. You can view these videos on-line at <https://youtu.be/SmIacIexwq4> and [https://youtu.be/\\_yTHc87GlcM](https://youtu.be/_yTHc87GlcM)

Amber enthusiastically recognizes her community partners as well. In 2018 she nominated multiple volunteers for Volunteer Excellence coins through the Corps Foundation. Her efforts as volunteer coordinator yielded 51 volunteers who provided 223 hours of service for a value of \$5,505 to the Corps in labor cost savings. In addition to volunteer service, the 2018 partnership benefits brought to the Corps through Amber's efforts totaled over \$17k.

### **Enhancement of Public Understanding of USACE and the Site**

The local community has received the greatest benefit since Amber's arrival at The Dalles Lock and Dam. Her programs have introduced the Corps missions to numerous people for the first time and made The Dalles Lock and Dam more than just a concrete structure in the Columbia River. Her ability to connect with all types of visitors and her range as an interpreter create the best possible experiences for visitors. Amber's best skill as an interpreter is taking Corps information and making it relevant to the visitor. She truly is an artist when it comes to interpretation because she understands how to use it as a tool to positively impact the community and meet management objectives.

For example, her dam tours incorporate cultural heritage interpretation while focusing on Corps missions, revealing the significance of The Dalles Lock and Dam to our cultural history and its importance historically and today. Amber continually reinvents herself and our programs by meeting challenges with optimism and getting results. Recently, she initiated a new carless transportation option to encourage visitors to go green and take public transportation, even on dam tours. Amber partnered with The Dalles Chamber of Commerce and Gray Line Bus Tours to pilot a hop-on, hop-off bus schedule that stops at tourist destinations throughout the City of The Dalles. As a result, The Dalles Dam tours and visitor center were the most visited location on the bus route. The eight Saturdays that bus tours were offered, served over 650 people in the summer of 2018. (NOTE: these numbers may seem small compared to other sites, but are significant to our rural community of 14,000.) Our partners and local business destinations along the route, considered the pilot program to be a success and therefore are going to continue the program in 2019. We are confident with Amber's leadership this program will grow and visitation and tourism regionally will continue to increase.

Amber ensures visitors to The Dalles Lock and Dam have opportunities to experience all the Corps civil works missions and is great at telling the Corps story to visitors and relating how the Corps affects their daily lives. The Corps of Engineers has had major impacts on life in the Columbia River Gorge, both positive and negative. Amber provides a variety of interpretive programs to visitors that present the local Corps story and the effects to the area communities, presenting a national story in terms everyone can understand.

The Columbia River Gorge is one of the most culturally sensitive Corps managed areas in the country and Amber creates interpretative opportunities to share this with visitors. One example is how she uses the Lewis and Clark Corps of Discovery Expedition on the Columbia River as a tool to explain the Corps of Engineers to students and visitors. In 2018 she secured a donation of three new Lewis and Clark interpretive signs from the National Park Service and implemented their selfie-spot challenge at our visitor center. Amber uses history to explain the importance of relationships and how they continue between the Corps and the four Treaty tribes along the Columbia River.

Amber has successfully marketed The Dalles Dam Visitor Center and on-site interpretive programs so that visitors such as school classes, civic groups and summer camps come to visit us instead of requesting outreach at their sites. Creative marketing of the Corps of Engineers facilities as a destination has resulted in increased visitation to Corps recreation areas.



## THE SEVEN DEADLY SWIMS

- ✦ Swimming outside a designated swimming area
- ✦ Swimming without a life jacket
- ✦ Jumping into unknown waters
- ✦ Swimming under the influence of alcohol/drugs
- ✦ Holding your breath too long while swimming
- ✦ Challenging someone to swim across a cove, lake, or pond or to an object such as a buoy
- ✦ Swimming to rescue a person, boat, beach ball, or some other object



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**Nominee: Amber C. Tilton, Park Ranger, The Dalles Lock and Dam**

**Citation**

Park Ranger Amber Tilton serves as the interpretive program lead at The Dalles Lock and Dam. Amber has created a vibrant and sustainable interpretive program that continues to grow as she fosters new partners and opportunities. She enhances public understanding of USACE missions by reaching audiences directly and indirectly through her creative use of multiple platforms. Examples of this are articles in academic journals and presentations at interpretive workshops, representing the Corps in educational film and developing new media products. She creates and promotes programs for the local community and now her talents are called upon several times a week by various local activity planners.

Dependable, creative, determined, motivated and most of all passionate are words that best describe Amber and her attitude towards interpretation. Her drive in making The Dalles interpretive program successful is relentless. The program has been thriving because Amber will ask the hard questions and go the extra mile. With her positive attitude she encourages increased visitation to our project. Her selfless service to the Corps of Engineers, The Dalles Lock and Dam and visitors has become a corner stone to our Natural Resource Management Program goals and missions. For these and all her other accomplishments, Amber Tilton embodies the Army values and characteristics of a professional interpreter and is highly deserving of the national Hiram M. Chittenden Award for Interpretive Excellence. She is a credit to The Dalles Lock and Dam, Portland District, the Corps of Engineers and the nation.