

## Reaching out in south Florida BY ERICA ROBBINS



When students from the Hobe Sound Early Learning Center visited the St. Lucie Lock and playground, volunteers Richard Wagner and Wayne Quint invited them to experience the interactive exhibits at the visitor center and presented a water safety program, including a showing of the Bobber the Water Safety Dog cartoon. (PHOTO BY ST. LUCIE LOCK VOLUNTEER JOANNE WAGNER)

Reaching out to the communities we serve, to engage them by providing information as well as seeking their input on our projects and processes, is a basic tenet of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Jacksonville District.

From formal meetings about the Central Everglades Planning Project to participating in community-based events, the Jacksonville District team is continuously engaged in a multitude of public interactions in south Florida.

Lt. Col. Thomas Greco, deputy district commander for south Florida, recently spoke about water releases from Lake Okeechobee with a group of about 100 marine and biological science students at the Jensen Beach High School. The invitation came from marine science teacher Crystal Lucas, who wanted to educate herself and her students about "the other side of the story." Her goal was to get information directly from the source and to provide some balance to the messages in the local media. Jensen Beach is close to Stuart in Martin County, where water releases from Lake Okeechobee and their effect on the

St. Lucie estuary and the Indian River Lagoon are frequent features in the local news.

After a brief introduction, Greco began the presentation began with this question: "What do you know about the Corps and what we do?"

The first answer out of the gate? "You dump water."

Greco, who was an instructor at West Point earlier in his career, was intent on clearing up misconceptions and providing a better understanding of the Corps as a whole. He provided a highly interactive presentation about the complexities of water management and Corps missions, prompting students to provide answers and their own solutions to some of the challenges that the Corps faces.

"It's very important that we maintain an open dialogue with the people we serve," said Greco. "In south Florida a critical component to this dialogue is helping others understand how decisions to release water are rooted in the complexities of an immense and unique ecosystem that has changed dramatically over the past century. The Corps has taken equally dramatic steps towards restoring this ecosystem – sharing that part of the story with students and others is especially important."

Another effective way to continue to build relationships with students and families is to participate in established annual events that draw large crowds, such as the 14th Annual Everglades Day Festival at the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge. This year's theme was, "Healthy Everglades, Healthy People" and the Corps had the opportunity to provide information on its missions, including Everglades restoration and water safety to more than 4,300 attendees of all ages. Corps mascots Okee the Osprey and Bobber the Water Safety Dog were also on hand, as was Freddy the Alligator, mascot of the South Florida Water Management District, the local sponsor for many of the Everglades restoration projects.

Sometimes the Corps goes to the people, and sometimes the people come to the Corps. When they do, Corps staff and volunteers do their best to make the most of the experience. When students from the Hobe Sound Early Learning Center visited the St. Lucie Lock and playground,



Everglades Day at the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge brings many families and children like Sara Green to the Corps booth, where they spin the "Wayne Drop" wheel and learn about the Everglades and water safety. (PHOTO BY ERICA ROBBINS)

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Both families and fierce creatures visited the Corps booth and learned about the Everglades and water safety at the Everglades Day event at the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge. (PHOTO BY ERICA ROBBINS)

volunteers Richard Wagner and Wayne Quint invited them to experience the interactive exhibits at the visitor center and presented a water safety program including a showing of the Bobber the Water Safety Dog cartoon. Park ranger Paula Bratschi said, "It was quick-thinking by volunteer Richard Wagner that made their visit into a learning experience on many levels. In addition, we plan to make this an annual event for the group."

The Corps also makes an effort to connect with people in the places that are part of their everyday lives. In Clewiston, more than 850 Walmart shoppers and bass fishing enthusiasts spoke with park rangers who were on hand to promote Corps missions, including water safety, during the two-day Walmart FLW Expo for the EverStart pro series bass tournament in Clewiston. Walmart shoppers and crowds that came to watch the competitors weigh in their catch from Lake Okeechobee stopped by the Corps booth and the mobile outreach trailer. The trailer is a great way to learn about Lake Okeechobee and the Okeechobee Waterway. The displays and take-away information featured native wildlife, recreational opportunities, water safety, invasive species, navigation, a timeline of the history of the waterway and Jacksonville District.

"Park rangers had so many visitors at the booth that they were able to give away two cases of coloring books with tips from Bobber the Water Safety Dog," said Rick Pelzl, supervisory park ranger. "It's a great way to meet with the community and get our important water safety messages out. I would support this event again."

Whether it's a school, a visitor center, a local event or even the local Walmart, Jacksonville District will continue to be there to educate and serve. ♦



Lt. Col. Thomas Greco, deputy district commander for south Florida, provided a highly interactive presentation about the complexities of water management and Corps missions to Jensen Beach High School marine and biological science students. (PHOTO BY ERICA ROBBINS)

## Close competition in the 2013 Black History Brain Brawl

BY ANNIE CHAMBERS



Carlos Clarke (left) and Robert Meekie, Contracting Division, celebrate their victory as 2013 Brain Brawl champions. (PHOTO BY CHRISTINA SWANSON)

Jacksonville District divisions are about to go head to head in the 2013 Black History Brain Brawl. The defending champions, Regulatory Division, walk in and set a large trophy on the table in front of them.

Chatter begins and friendly taunts fly between divisions. Spectators arrive to cheer on their teammates. Loud clapping or boos follow each question answered. Jeopardy-style competition with questions ranging from 200 to 2,000 points each. The categories include: Freedom and Equality, March on Washington, Emancipation Proclamation, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Participants were given materials to study prior to the Brain Brawl. Questions ranged from specific event dates to fill-in-the-blanks for quotations from civil rights leaders. The competition got fierce in the second round, but Contracting took the lead and the trophy from Regulatory. The team included Robert Meekie, Carlos Clarke, Remi Eggers, Shannon Hyatt and Nancy Krause.

"Black history is still relevant because civil rights movements occurred in the '60s; this is not an ancient issue," said Remi Eggers, contract specialist.

Among the more surprising facts were that Abraham Lincoln is enshrined in the Wrestling Hall of Fame and that he created the Secret Service hours before he was assassinated. Even the spectators were able to learn bits and pieces of history from the sidelines.

"It's not about winning or losing, it's about learning things," said Eggers.

Members of the Contracting Division would like to see more competitions for other historic events and observance months.

"I participated because it's a great way to interact with coworkers and it's a lot of fun," said Nancy Krause, contract specialist. ♦