

This is Wisconsin Water News, a production of the University of Wisconsin Sea Grant Program. I'm your host, Marie Zhuikov. Today's episode is:

Beach Ambassadors fill vital role on Milwaukee beach

This summer on Bradford Beach in Milwaukee, swimmers might notice people in light blue T-shirts pushing an ice cream cart across the sand. But instead of frozen treats, the cart contains brochures and other information that beachgoers need to keep safe.

The cart is part of a new Beach Ambassador Pilot Project run by Wisconsin Sea Grant, Milwaukee Water Commons, Milwaukee Riverkeeper, Coastline Services and the Milwaukee Community Sailing Center. Wisconsin Sea Grant's social science outreach specialist Deidre Peroff said these organizations created the project in response to four drownings that occurred on McKinley Beach in Milwaukee in 2020, and an increase in beachgoers because of the pandemic.

"Obviously, there were not that many things to do during the pandemic, so a lot more people were getting outside and utilizing the beach. People were coming from all different backgrounds and different levels of swimming knowledge and competency, so it was just really risky."

Peroff said there was a lifeguard shortage last year and that this year, in 2021, there are no lifeguards on Milwaukee beaches. This makes the Beach Ambassador project even more relevant. She explained the project is not designed to replace lifeguards . . .

"But just to provide education and information for people so that they can protect themselves, and then, hopefully, share that information with others. There's also a social justice element to it because all four people who drowned at McKinley Beach last year were African American."

This project supports Peroff's ongoing work to address racial disparities around swimming in Milwaukee and provide access to more opportunities for people to have meaningful experiences with water.

With funding from a National Sea Grant Covid 19 Pandemic Relief Social Justice grant that was matched by Milwaukee Water Commons, three beach ambassadors were hired as well as an intern. Since McKinley Beach is closed, the ambassadors are walking Bradford Beach in teams with their cart each Thursday through Sunday from Memorial Day to Labor Day in 2021. They inform people about topics related to water safety such as water quality conditions, rip currents, dehydration and hypothermia. The ambassadors encourage them to check the [Milwaukee County Parks Weather and Beach Conditions website](#) for more information and also let them know where safety equipment is located on the beach, should it be needed.

Jumana Tanner is the intern Peroff hired for the Beach Ambassador project. A sophomore enrolled at the University of Wisconsin-Madison studying marine biology, Tanner is excited about spending time on the beach several days each week.

"I'm definitely getting a lot of hands-on experience with people. There's a lot of networking and interactions with the public and strategizing how to effectively communicate about science. I have realized it doesn't matter how much knowledge I might have – being able to effectively communicate that with people makes a greater difference."

Tanner was thankful for the extensive training she received leading up to her posting as a beach ambassador. She said the ambassadors learned about dangerous currents, E. coli testing and drowning statistics. They also practiced various educational scenarios for interacting with the public.

With her colorful headscarf and heart-shaped sunglasses, Tanner cuts an unusual and enthusiastic figure on the beach. Besides providing beach information, she sees her internship as an opportunity to show people her character and Muslim culture, as well as furthering her career goals.

“I try to match my scarf with something else on me like jewelry or my shoes. When I come up to people with my bubbly personality, they get that color coordination to match with it. I use it to show people what my personality’s like and that I’m not intimidating. They shouldn’t be scared of me.”

“My ultimate career goal is to effectively communicate with people about discoveries in our water. Our water is our greatest resource and it’s not being taken care of the way it takes care of us. That’s an issue for the future.”

Besides walking the beach, Tanner is helping to evaluate the project and shape it for possible future use at additional beaches. After each engagement with the public, the ambassadors write down what kind of information they provided and how people reacted.

Peroff said she’s not sure what the next steps will be for this unique program.

“We’ll see how it goes and see if people are finding it valuable and go from there.”

That’s it for this episode of Wisconsin Water News, just one of the ways that Wisconsin Sea Grant promotes the sustainable use of Great Lakes resources through research, education and outreach. Listen and subscribe to us through Spotify, I-Tunes and Google Play or at seagrant.wisc.edu. Thank you to Deidre Peroff and Jumana Tanner, and thank you for listening.