

Bulletin

Office of Public Affairs
5275 Leesburg Pike, MS-EA
Falls Church, VA 22041-3803
Phone: 703-358-2220
Fax: 703-358-2245
<http://www.fws.gov>



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Contact: Vanessa Kauffman
703-358-2138
vanessa_kauffman@fws.gov



In a City's Tough Streets, a Charismatic Native Sells Kids on Nature

Using nature to expand young people's horizons is a challenge when the kids live in an inner city more than an hour. But some U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service [national wildlife refuges](#) are finding a way.

This past summer, the first youth "ambassador" from [Wallkill River National Wildlife Refuge](#) in New York and New Jersey helped bridge the 66-mile gap to the refuge's partner city of Yonkers, NY, across the Hudson River.

From a colorful booth at the weekly farmers market in downtown Yonkers, 21-year-old Melissa Guevara attracted kids and their parents with an infectious smile, nature stories and objects from Wallkill River Refuge.

"I brought a lot of touchable things, like bobcat pelts, duck wings and fox tails," says Guevara, an environmental and urban studies major at Bard College in New York's Hudson Valley. "Yonkers children aren't very exposed to wildlife outside of an occasional raccoon or skunk. They're pretty much housebound." Some parents, she says, were as "amazed" as their kids. "A lot of parents don't have a chance to get out and explore."

Guevara didn't just woo kids off their smartphones with tales of pollinators, native plants and conservation careers. She also touted the partnership begun in 2011 between Wallkill River Refuge and Groundwork Hudson Valley, a Yonkers-based nonprofit – one of 17 such urban wildlife refuge partnerships in which the Service participates.

For more than a decade, Groundwork has mentored low-income teens from Yonkers and helped them make their neighborhoods greener. Now, the partnership gives Groundwork teens several days of conservation training each year at Wallkill River Refuge. (Guevara first visited the refuge as a Groundwork teen in 2012.) Refuge staff also visit the teens' work sites in Yonkers – new greenways and community gardens and riverfront restorations – to compare notes on environmental recovery.

Along with the stories and animal skins, Guevara brought another thing: street cred. In a city with a large Hispanic population, it helped that she was a lifelong Yonkers resident and a Spanish-speaker — the child of Mexican immigrants. On top of that, her background as a 2014 Career Discovery Internship Program intern at [Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge](#) in Maine made her a knowledgeable source on refuges and wildlife conservation.

As the summer wore on, families sought her out at the farmers market, recalls Marilyn Kitchell, the Wallkill River Refuge biologist who hired Guevara. “Parents would say, ‘My kids drag me past your table every week because they want to see what [objects] you have.’ They got to recognize Melissa. She is just so personable, so outgoing, always full of energy. She was just a fantastic addition to the partnership.”

The urban partnership teaches kids how they can better lives and communities as the next generation of conservation stewards. “The challenge in urban America is that many jobs like those in the Service are just not on the radar of these kids,” says Curt Collier, national youth program director with Groundwork USA. “Their parents don't do [conservation]. They don't do it. They don't see it happening in their neighborhood. So we try to engage the youth in projects so that the whole community values their work.”

For her part, Guevara says her work with refuges, with Groundwork and with the urban partnership has helped her mature emotionally and intellectually. From a middle schooler who “didn't even know what it meant to be a biologist,” she has grown into an adult looking to build a career around helping “urban youth to have experiences I've had” in the natural environment.

“These experiences made me understand my full potential. ...I know I can do really well camping and doing backcountry and trail work. They're my hobbies now, instead of being something I feared and dreaded as a child.” That's a message she spreads to others: Lots of kids, she says, “don't understand their full potential until they get out there and do these things and then it's like, ‘Oh wow, I can excel at almost anything.’”

Conservation learning, Guevara tells them, starts with wildlife refuges. “I think it's important for youth and children to begin at the refuge level, because they need to know the work that gets done there,” she says. “A lot of kids I met, most of them didn't know refuge work was possible or what that meant... You talk to them, and they say, ‘I love animals. I want to help animals. I guess I'll be a veterinarian or a zookeeper.’ And I say, ‘What about refuges? You can help animals there too. You can get to help wildlife.’ And they're like, ‘Oh, I didn't know that existed.’”

“So I think a lot of these children are looking for a profession they don't know about yet. And I think refuge work is very important. Conservation is very important. And a lot of kids would excel at it if they just knew it was out there.”

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