

Water quality stewards honored for work

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Five individuals and groups were presented with the Whitefish Lake Institute's first annual Stewardship Awards this week.

The Institute received nine nominations this past fall, and its Citizen Advisory Committee approved the choices in early January.

Lifetime achievement

Bill Leonard has retired from three careers — the Army, the railroad and Midwest Assistance Program, a nonprofit

organization that travels to rural communities and helps them set up and finance water and sewer systems.

In 1982, Leonard spearheaded the effort to establish the Whitefish County Water and Sewer District, the public entity that oversees water quality here. Voters approved creating the district with a 4-1 vote.

Two years later, Leonard helped get funding for the first hydrologic study of Whitefish Lake. While science and research were the driving force behind the project, Leonard was concerned about algae growth in the lake.

"It was obvious that the lake was degrading before our eyes," Leonard explained, recalling the colored rocks visible in 8-10-foot deep, crystal-clear waters. "That started fading to gray-green scum. The general consensus was that the lake was going downhill. We had to establish a baseline."

Leonard advocated for a second water-quality assessment, which was completed in 2004. His tireless efforts behind the scenes, writing and administering grants and serving on the Water and Sewer District since its inception, earned him the respect of those who have worked close to him.

Leonard also gives talks to the Whitefish High School's Project Freeflow — and he donated the pontoon boat that the Whitefish Lake Institute uses to further research on local lakes.

Individual stewardship

That a class on scientific research would turn into an award-winning science project and a summer of scientific study of local lakes surprised Whitefish High School senior Kristi Whisler.

Whisler's study on the effects of forest-fire retardant on the zooplankton in Whitefish Lake earned her fifth place among 50 competitors at the Montana State Science Fair. Her findings demonstrated the fragile ecosystem of local lakes.

In 2008, Whisler signed on as an unpaid intern at the Whitefish Lake Institute and spent countless hours collecting and analyzing data on local lakes.

"I'd always loved the lake and wanted to know more about it," Whisler explained.

Whisler's introduction to the science of water quality started in her freshman year on Haskill Creek, where she participated in the high school's Freeflow program.

But it's the depth and dedication that Whisler employed following the trail of water science that earned her this year's stewardship award.

Group stewardship

The SunCrest Homeowner Association's restoration of a stream bed on their property proves what many stewards have long understood — that the natural state is often the most efficient and aesthetic way to protect water quality.

For years, a little stretch of lakefront property owned by the homeowner's association gobbled up lots of time for maintenance and mowing crews. Hoping that native plants might help matters, then-president Rodger Hawkins approached the native landscape company Forestation for assistance.

Forestation owner Greg Gunderson discovered a perennial stream bed at the site that was altered some 50 years ago for an apple orchard, and he suggested restoring the area as a stream bed.

SunCrest's 74 lot-owners approved spending about \$4,000 to improve the common area. Dogwood, willow, hawthorn, serviceberry, cottonwood and aspen were planted — native plants with deep roots that would consume seepage and filter out chemicals that traveled to the lake.

SunCrest homeowners can now look forward to a beautiful songbird habitat that also acts as a natural filter for the lake — and maintenance crews have far less work to do.

Individual award

For more than 52 years, Kaare Hitland has been quietly protecting Whitefish Lake and his property on the lake. This do-it-yourself stewardship didn't spring from philosophy or a college degree but from a simple and abiding love of his land and the lake.

Hitland is one of the lake's most senior residents, and from his first days on the lake, stewardship has ruled his actions. He and his wife Ruth designed their property to preserve as much natural vegetation as possible in order to protect the lake from surface runoffs and to use the existing plants as a way to filter sediments.

But Hitland's minimal-impact ethos goes beyond his property line. Hitland is an influential spokesman when it comes to rallying collective efforts on the lake. He advocated for a new sewer system that was installed around the lake.

Group award

For more than three decades, the Whitefish Lake and Lakeshore Protection Committee has worked diligently year-round to ensure that local lakes have the highest quality of water.

In 1974, locals Gene Hedman, Charlie Abell, Bob Brown and Frank Morrison traveled to Helena to testify for legislation to give local government the tools needed to protect their lake resources. The legislation became Montana state law in 1975.

The Committee began work the very next year. Since that time, countless citizens have served on the committee to ensure guidelines are followed that protect the natural beauty of the lake and the value of lakeshore property.

The committee, its activities, its individuals and its successes rarely receive accolades or recognition for the countless hours of time and energy that it takes to give back to the community. Its members, past and present, finally deserve a pat on the back.