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**2019 URBAN WATERS LEARNING NETWORK AWARDS CELEBRATE FIVE LEADERS**

June 3, 2019 [Boulder, Colorado] – Five leaders have been chosen for recognition by the Urban Waters Learning Network (UWLN), a partnership of the national nonprofits River Network and Groundwork USA. The Urban Waters Learning Network Awards, sponsored by the U.S. EPA, celebrate significant achievements of individuals who have improved urban waterways and revitalized the neighborhoods around them. These members exemplify the UWLN's goal of providing peer-to-peer support, solving challenges through collaboration, and sharing knowledge.

"These leaders were selected by their peers to represent the spirit of the Urban Waters Learning Network in the areas of equity and environmental justice, water quality and monitoring, environmental education, and mentorship," says Maria Brodine, Water Program Specialist at Groundwork USA. "They carry the banner for the people doing hard work to improve waterways in neighborhoods throughout the country."

"It's easy to get bogged down by the many challenges facing our urban waterways, but when we look closely, we find dedicated leaders working in every community to propose solutions and move ideas to action, making a positive difference for their waters and their communities," says Diana Toledo, Leadership Development Director of River Network and Co-Coordinator of the UWLN. "It is a pleasure to celebrate the accomplishments of these individuals and organizations."

**The 2018 Urban Waters Learning Network Awardees include:**

**Gail Heffner, *Signature Award***

Gail Gunst Heffner, Ph.D., is a member of the faculty at Calvin College. In collaboration with colleague Dave Warners, Heffner launched Plaster Creek Stewards, a watershed restoration initiative in West Michigan. Plaster Creek Stewards is celebrating its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year and the work has focused on education, research, and on-the-ground restoration. A highlight of this work is the many community members throughout the watershed—all ages, all backgrounds, upstream and downstream—who have joined the effort to restore health and beauty to Plaster Creek, the most contaminated urban waterway in West Michigan. She recently authored a chapter on environmental racism for *Beyond Stewardship: New Approaches to Creation Care*, a book which will be published in July 2019.

**Dave Warners, *Signature Award***

Dave Warners, Ph.D., has been a biology professor at Calvin College since 1997. In 2009, he and colleague Gail Heffner initiated a campus-based group called Plaster Creek Stewards that is working to restore health and beauty to our local watershed. Warners has also teamed up with Garrett Crow (Professor Emeritus, University of New Hampshire) on a project that is documenting the botanical and ecological changes in West Michigan over the past 120 years. He recently co-edited *Beyond Stewardship: New Approaches to Creation Care*, which will be published in July 2019.

**Paulina López, *Expert Award in Water Quality & Monitoring***

Paulina López (M.A. in Law in Intercultural Human Rights) is a volunteer, organizer, advocate, and mother of three boys under the age of 12. Presently, she is the Executive Director for the Duwamish River Cleanup Coalition/TAG, advocating for communities to participate in complex processes and to have a voice. López has over 20 years of

experience working with issues of civil rights, social justice, equity, education, and diversity. She demonstrates engagement in the community through advocacy for civic policies including those that support a safe, clean environment for families in her area. López has served in community organizations which endeavor to foster civic engagement among recent immigrants and has labored extensively to promote local social and environmental justice issues uniquely affecting our recent immigrant communities. She has helped develop the City of Seattle's Equity and Environment Agenda, Health Impact Assessments and others. López has a passion for community engagement, especially for underrepresented communities on issues that affect them as well advocacy for human rights issues. Originally from Ecuador, she has made Seattle her home for 15 years.

#### **San Juan Bay Estuary Program (Brenda Torres Barreto), *Expert Award in Environmental Justice & Equity***

Brenda Torres Barreto (M.A. in Environmental Management, Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies) has advised government, business and community leaders in the application of sustainability practices in their social and economic projects. She serves as Executive Director of the San Juan Bay Estuary Program, an initiative focused on the restoration of water bodies in the metropolitan area of Puerto Rico. Through the Estuary Program, Torres Barreto coordinates multisector efforts, empowers citizens to be part of the restoration process, and ensures the well-being of residents of the metropolitan area. She is also the founder of the Latino Climate Action Network, which allows emerging leaders to take part in the discussion on climate justice by preparing them to evaluate and propose policy briefings. Torres Barreto has served in numerous forums by providing policy advice on major restoration projects and social projects in California, New York and Puerto Rico. Brenda collaborates with the Puerto Rican diaspora and contributes to the empowerment of this population in the U.S. through her volunteer work at the Roundtable of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies of CUNY Hunter College and as a listener in the Puerto Rican National Agenda.

#### **Bronx River Alliance (Michelle Luebke), *Expert Award in Environmental Education***

Michelle Luebke is the Bronx River Alliance's Director for Environmental Stewardship. Luebke has over ten years of experience leading adults and school groups through creeks and natural areas, managing ecological monitoring programs, and teaching about environmental science and sustainability. She holds an M.S. from the University of Georgia in Geography and Conservation Ecology & Sustainable Development, an M.A. from New York University in Environmental Conservation Education, and a B.S. from the University of Wisconsin in Zoology and Environmental Studies. She served as an Environmental Education Peace Corps Volunteer in the Dominican Republic.

#### **About the Urban Waters Learning Network**

The UWLN is a peer-to-peer network of people and organizations that share practical on-the-ground experiences in order to improve urban waterways and revitalize the neighborhoods around them. Groundwork USA and River Network are partners in coordinating the Learning Network, providing support and opportunities for members to share successes, challenges, and technical resources. [www.urbanwaterslearningnetwork.org](http://www.urbanwaterslearningnetwork.org)

#### **About Groundwork USA**

Dedicated to changing places and changing lives, Groundwork USA is a national network of 20 local trusts, engaging local residents, businesses, and government officials to revitalize underserved neighborhoods and transform community liabilities into community assets. [www.groundworkusa.org](http://www.groundworkusa.org)

#### **About River Network**

River Network is the foremost nonprofit connecting nearly 6,000 water-focused organizations, agencies, businesses, and communities for greater local impact and healthier rivers across the U.S. [www.rivernetwork.org](http://www.rivernetwork.org)

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