

A Seed of Change

Michelle Villafranca, Natural Resource Specialist

Change is part of life, something to embrace. Although I am personally uncomfortable with change, I know it is necessary to accept new challenges in order to grow. It takes courage to diverge from the current path and try something new. I recently accepted a position as a park planner in the City of Fort Worth's Park & Recreation Department.

While I have mixed emotions about leaving the Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge, for the past 11 years, I have shared my passion for the natural world, pouring my blood, sweat, and tears into helping make the park a better place for wildlife, visitors, volunteers, and staff. I have enjoyed working with a team that is dedicated to actively stewarding the natural resources of the park and spreading the word about the value of natural areas. This work is in my blood; it is my soul.

Beginnings in Forestry

I came to the Nature Center in 2008 by way of the City of Fort Worth's forestry section, where I conducted outreach education and coordination of tree planting programs with community groups and volunteers. Prior to this, I had worked for The Nature Conservancy, the National Park Service, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and the U.S. Forest Service in various roles as a field biologist conducting botanical and avian surveys as well as prescribed burns, so my skill set and previous experience were actually more in line with the mission of the Nature Center.



Supporting your local monster at the Lake Worth Monster Bash. FWNC&R Staff Photo.



Collecting seed with greenhouse volunteers. FWNC&R Staff Photo.

After four years in the forestry section, I had no idea how rewarding working at the Nature Center would be. Sure, I expected it to be amazing because the position I stepped into, Natural Resource Specialist, was a culmination of my previous experience. However, this job has been so much more. I have grown beyond measure in my knowledge of ecology and have advanced my skills more than I could have imagined.

In my first few weeks, I hiked the trails, familiarized myself with the park, and worked alongside my colleagues to learn the tricks of their trade. I was ready to change the world and tackle all the privet across the landscape. Mentorship by others with more experience taught me a more realistic and measured approach. But alas, my time here was not all about privet!

A Native Greenhouse

From the beginning, I was tasked with starting a native plant greenhouse. My previous knowledge from working with trees and plants helped me develop a greenhouse program and recruit volunteers to sow the seeds of what the greenhouse has become. It took all of those 11 years to get to where we are now: receiving a grant for \$25,000 (thank you to the Friends of the Fort Worth Nature Center for writing the grant); constructing a new greenhouse, metal building, and shade structure; building a wonderful base of dedicated greenhouse volunteers; and developing the Native Neighborhoods program. From 2010 to 2019, greenhouse volunteers donated nearly 8,000 hours of their time and expertise, outplanted nearly 11,000 native plants, and gave almost 1,000 of those plants to Fort Worthians through the Native Neighborhoods program.

Then There Was Fire

As parts of the greenhouse program began to blend with the fire program, I was able to use my experience with the National Park Service and The Nature Conservancy to develop the Fire Effects Vegetation Monitoring Program, with accompanying photo points. Vegetation monitoring and photo points are important components of a prescribed burn program to document whether it



Dedicating the Oak Motte pollinator sign with Joann Karges. FWNC&R Staff Photo.

is accomplishing land management goals. The surveys and photos document species diversity and composition over time.

Trails, Teaching, and a Monster

One of my favorite aspects of the park is its amazing trail system. With more than 20 miles of trails, maintenance is a continuing task.

I have gladly trimmed and chainsawed endless miles of trails to ensure that the Nature Center has the best natural trail system in the state (in my opinion). The most fun and fulfilling aspect of trail work for me is rerouting, designing, and building new trails and infrastructure such as bridges. Every time I hike a trail here, I am proud of the improvements that Natural Guard volunteers and staff have accomplished.

Working on Riverbottom's Slough Bridge with the Natural Guard and Nic Martinez. FWNC&R Staff Photo.

The expertise and skills I built working at the Nature Center have taught me to be a better natural history interpreter, teacher, and mentor. I have been able to use these skills to develop interpretive signs at Chisholm Trail Park and the Nature Center's Oak Motte trail. I have had fun presenting and interpreting natural history to students, groups, and Master Naturalists. Although coordinating special events is not necessarily in the job description for natural resource work, it is a great outreach tool. I have been fortunate enough to use my talents coordinating Lake Worth Monster Bash and the Broadview: A Spectrum of Nature gallery art exhibit.

Collaborators

Working at the Nature Center has afforded me endless opportunities to work with and learn from professors, researchers, and natural resource professionals on research projects ranging from alligators to spotted skunks, game camera wildlife surveys, soils, fire, and much more. I also have had the privilege of working on natural resource projects across the city, including restoration and trail work at Tandy Hills Natural Area and Chisholm Trail Park and City of Fort Worth stormwater projects.

The best part of working at the park is meeting the amazing volunteers and interns who spend their time with us. Volunteers dedicate a lifetime of knowledge, eagerness, and willingness to learn. They expand the staff's capacity to reach and accomplish more

than would be possible with staff alone. I have worked closely with interns over the years, and being able to witness how they have learned and grown into young natural resource professionals has been inspiring and exciting. Interns give me hope that a younger generation will take better care of Mother Earth.

I could go on about how the Nature Center has positively influenced me and been instrumental in my professional and spiritual growth, but I will stop now. I thank you all for the opportunities I have been given over my 11 years at the Nature Center. I have thoroughly enjoyed collaborating, working as a team, and sharing my passion as an ecologist. I have met many amazing people, made many friends, and learned much along this journey. Although I am nervous about leaving my position here, I am also hopeful that I can carry what I have learned and apply it toward 'greening' the city in new ways.



Constructing a new trail next to the Hardwicke Interpretive Center with the Marine Creek Land Scholars. FWNC&R Staff Photo.