

News-Press.

ENVIRONMENT

No grant-writing experience? No problem - FGCU students rally for Lovers Key

Louise Kowitch Special to Fort Myers News-Press

Published 9:00 a.m. ET Dec. 18, 2020

COVID-19 has radically altered the educational landscape. For some students, it's made learning a trying experience. For others, the unusual circumstances have presented unexpected opportunities.

Undaunted by remote classes and partial shutdowns, an enterprising group of students at Florida Gulf Coast University forged ahead with a series of innovative projects at Lovers Key State Park. The 712-acre park, a regional favorite, offers two pristine miles of coastline, standing in peaceful contrast to nearby Fort Myers Beach.

The students are part of Trails for Tails - or "T4T" as it is affectionately called, a service learning class at FGCU. Last year, they raised money to keep trails in their most natural state to foster healthy habitats for wildlife. Their endeavors began in 2019 with direct service projects - clean-up of garbage and microplastics, eradication of invasive species and light pruning. This year, with guidance from Friends of Lovers Key, T4T has expanded its work to include fundraising for the park, upgraded interpretive signage for trails, social media outreach, and educational materials to support the Welcome and Discovery Center. These projects - as well as the native landscaping demonstration garden - will continue in the spring semester in 2021.

Now, T4T is a collaborative partnership among Lovers Key State Park staff, Friends of Lovers Key (known as "FOLKS") volunteers and instructor Jessica Rhea's Honors Service-Learning course at FGCU. The students' pluck and commitment have not gone unnoticed. By the end of the fall semester, five of them won grants totaling more than \$2,000 to

advance environmental education and stewardship at the park – even though this was their first attempt at grant-writing.

The collaboration originally grew out of conversations that took place in 2019 in anticipation of two openings: the park’s Welcome and Discovery Center, and FGCU’s Water School.

During the partners’ first meeting, FGCU President Mike Martin remarked that “both the park and the university envision innovative, service-learning programs that embrace multiple disciplines and are fully engaged with the community.”

Two years later, that vision has become reality.

T4T has completed several environmental projects in preparation of the opening of the Welcome and Discovery Center in early 2021.

Friends of Lovers Key has mounted a \$1.5 million capital campaign to finish the interior of the Welcome & Discovery Center, which will include an environmental exhibit, bookstore, ranger station, community room and, thanks to the FGCU students, a native plant landscaping demonstration garden

So what if TripAdvisor didn't mention our beaches? We Southwest Floridians know the truth

With the guidance of park rangers and FOLKS volunteers, the students created educational materials for children, designed eye-catching trail signage, and updated media resources.

They also work on trail maintenance and beach and estuary clean-ups while learning about biodiversity, invasive non-native species, and the threats posed by plastic debris and monofilament.

Their service aligns with the mission of the park: to protect, preserve and restore the natural habitats of coastal Florida. Clay Motley, Director of Honors College, called T4T “the flagship service program” of FGCU, and there’s a waiting list for the course in the second semester.

Last month, juniors Calvin Finley and Taylor Vickers and senior Mackenzie Mondo won a “SAGE” grant to continue T4T’s work in 2021.

SAGE stands for "Student Associates for a Greener Environment" and is funded by the Center for Environmental and Sustainability Education at FGCU. The grant will fund the native garden adjacent to the new Welcome and Discovery Center. The garden will help educate the public about the importance of native vegetation in protecting and restoring Florida’s natural habitats and ecosystems.

Juniors Ariel Joel and Lea Manniello were so inspired by T4T’s mission that they formed a Registered Student Organization, “Leaders for Lovers Key”, to raise money for the park’s education and restoration programs. The two applied for and won a grant from Cape Coral Community Foundation.

Even though the two students completed the service-learning class last year, they wanted to continue their involvement in T4T. Their mentor, Friends of Lovers Key grant writer Deb Voorhees, said, “When Ariel and Lea won, I told them that their work will be felt for many years to come.”

Rhea, Senior Director of Experiential Learning & Career Development at FGCU, is proud of how her students developed new professional skills, learned about coastal ecosystems and served the community. “The situation (caused by the pandemic) did not stop these students from coming out to the park, pitching in, and making a difference,” she said.

The students clearly understand the broader significance of their work.

“By educating people on environmentally-conscious behaviors and teaching them to understand the importance of local flora and fauna and their contributions to the world around us, we can make the world a better, more sustainable place for everyone in it,” Taylor said. “It takes community-wide change to make a meaningful and positive impact, and I believe environmental stewardship is a great way to make such change.”

- Louise Kowitch is education coordinator with Friends of Lovers Key

If you go

During the pandemic, Lovers Key State Park is open 8 a.m. to sunset. The address is 8700 Estero Blvd., and admission is \$8 per vehicle. The kayak launch road, north gate entrance and bayside area are open. Concession rentals and the boat ramp are available, but the tram to the beach is currently unavailable. Eagle Trail and the Service Road Trail are currently closed due to construction associated with the Welcome and Discovery Center. All other facilities are open. Visitors are expected to maintain distances of at least six feet apart.