



RESEARCH CATEGORY

2nd Place (IL)

Aksel Escareno, Wheaton IL

Aksel is 13 years old and enjoys soccer, running, drums, and drawing. His favorite subject in school is math. Aksel loves how refreshing water is, whether it is a good shower or a day of kayaking.

AKSEL'S ESSAY

One Drop Makes a Difference

In our world, individual actions impact people and communities near and far. Both a drop of water from a sink and a raindrop from a cloud travel through watersheds to join rivers on their way to the ocean. The health or impairments of these drops have a combined impact along their journey. My watershed, Lower West Branch DuPage River (LWBDR), in Wheaton, IL, is made up of 853 acres of land. The water from this portion of land flows into the Springbrook Tributary or Ferry Creek and enters the Lower West Branch DuPage River, where the water joins the DuPage River on its way to the Mississippi River.

Though my community appreciates water, surprisingly, 90% of the waters in the LWBDR watershed are impaired. The streams, rivers, and lakes lack oxygen, contain water pollutants (such as nitrogen, phosphorus, bacteria, and fecal coliform) and have a degraded habitat. These impairments endanger aquatic life and impact people's ability to boat and swim. Because of these impairments, the local government,

together with the Environmental Protection Agency, has taken action to add more dissolved oxygen to help aquatic life thrive and to decrease the minimum maximum load of pollution allowed to enter the water. On one of my daily runs, I noticed the Spring Brook Wetland and Creek Restoration Project at the Blackwell Forest Preserve. This project directly improved the aforementioned impairments. For instance, the project created wetlands to convey upstream stormwater and treated effluent and also removed a dam to allow fish to swim freely upstream. This project, funded by the Illinois Tollway, was largely completed in 2020 to mitigate impacts from rebuilding the Central TriState Tollway (Blackwell).

After researching the restoration project at Blackwell Forest Preserve, I wondered where local effluent was treated. As a result of this investigation, I took a virtual tour of the Wheaton Sanitary District (WSD), a reclamation plant that treats wastewater from Wheaton, Southern Carrol Stream, a small portion of Glen Elen, and unincorporated parts of DuPage County (Virtual Plant Tour). To improve the treatment of effluent, Congressmen Sean Casten obtained 2.6 million dollars to invest in WSD.

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WATER'S WORTH IT

Matthew Larson, Executive Director of WSD, states that the money will provide "wastewater treatment infrastructure that will be used to keep our streams, rivers, and waterways clean" (Casten Announces EPA Approval). This funding will ensure that the water released from WSD into Spring Brook is healthy for the environment.

While WSD does their part to clean the watershed, I can do mine. Like a drop of water becoming part of a stream, my individual actions, joined by the people around me, can improve the condition of our watershed. As a result of this essay and research, I am convinced to help change impaired waters. For instance, I will shorten my showers, pick up my dog's waste and not put too much salt on the ice after I shovel, seeing

that these things all contribute to the low oxygen level. As Mother Teresa said, "I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across the waters to create many ripples."

Writing this paper made me think of the little harmful things I put in the water while thinking that they won't hurt anything. However, thousands of people are doing the same exact thing at the same exact moment. This negatively affects miles of ocean, river, and creek water. In contrast, I recognized how individual organizations such as the Wheaton Sanitary District, the local government, the federal government, the Illinois Tollway, and the Park Districts unite to care and conserve our watershed. Teamwork is at the heart of great achievements.