



Anniversary Story

“What Nebraska Gave Michigan”

By Christine Spitzley, Greater Lansing Area, Michigan
Groundwater Guardian Team

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I was born and raised in Michigan and am proud to have attended Michigan State University in East Lansing and my decision to live and work in the Great Lakes State has been very rewarding. Pure Michigan has the longest coastline in the lower 48, where the water is salt and shark free. We also have a quiet little secret, aquifers, which provide almost half of the state’s drinking water. Underestimated, under looked, and certainly underappreciated, groundwater is vital to our health and economy.



Christine Spitzley poses with the water drop mascot at a water festival in Michigan.

In 1994, I was four years into my professional career as the Environmental Programs Planner at the Tri-County Regional Planning Commission (TCRPC), and the focus of my job was to provide groundwater education and policy guidance to 78 local units of government in a three county region. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation had committed over \$35 million to its Groundwater Education in Michigan (GEM) Program. As a grantee, TCRPC focused on educating elected officials, but the long term goal was to expand that to a broader audience so that everyone in mid-Michigan would know, understand and want to protect its groundwater. GEM provided money to universities, governments, NGO’s, health departments, etc. and emphasized the sharing and dissemination of each grantees successes and challenges. But all good things come to an end and

the mid 1990’s saw the conclusion of the GEM Program. We had momentum, we had tools, we had success, and we now needed sustainability.

In 1994, sustainability was generally thought of only in financial terms. Thanks in large part to our education efforts, local communities stepped up and replaced the funding we had been receiving from GEM. But that was only part of the equation. We had benefitted greatly from the GEM network and immediately missed the support and camaraderie of like-minded organizations. We wanted to continue to share our ideas and to glean information and lessons learned from others.

A postcard from Nebraska inviting me to a conference in Washington D.C. to learn about the newly created Groundwater Guardian Program turned out to be the connection we sought to broaden our network of groundwater communities. Sitting in a hotel meeting room, I saw dozens of people who spent their days working to raise awareness and increase the protection of this valuable resource. People loaded with creativity, passion, and a commitment to an unseen resource that is frequently misunderstood and mistreated. Their mission, like mine, was to help educate people so they cared enough about groundwater to change their behaviors.

The Greater Lansing Area was first designated as a Groundwater Guardian Community in 1995. Our annual application is an opportunity for reflection as we select key projects for recognition. Through the years, these have included wellhead protection, public awareness campaigns, children's water festival, college curriculum development, and changes to public policy. The Groundwater Guardian network has also been a valuable source of information when we seek answers to emerging issues.

The Groundwater Guardian designation provides acknowledgment for the work we do to protect groundwater. Work that is not a state or federal mandate. Work our communities are committed to because it's the right thing to do. Work that will gift future generations a legacy of safe water.

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