

Making a Difference

Longtime Groundwater Guardian Team Leader Set Out to Make a Difference in Her Community

by Jennifer Wemhoff, Groundwater Foundation

The term “sparkplug” has been used by the Groundwater Foundation for years to describe people who are the doers in their community—the ones who are passionate about an issue, have connections throughout the community, and are motivated to make change happen.

Catherine Chertudi of Boise, Idaho is one such sparkplug, which is evident by Boise’s 25 years in the Groundwater Guardian program under her leadership.

Chertudi has always had an interest in the environment. She earned a degree from Boise State University in Environmental Health and pursued graduate courses in the same field. She started her professional career with the Idaho Attorney General working on the first Superfund sites in the state. After working in the Water Bureau for the Department of Environmental Quality, she became the Groundwater Programs Coordinator for the City of Boise in 1990, where she worked on hazardous wastes and groundwater protection and remediation programs until she was promoted to supervise a new unit in Public Works responsible for trash, recycling, hazardous waste and groundwater programs in 1995.

In 1993, during the program’s testing year, Boise was approached by Bob Kuzelka to be part of the pilot group of Groundwater Guardian communities. The City had previously received a grant from the U.S. EPA wellhead protection program to begin evaluating wells and threats in a growing area of the city. “The grant put us on the Groundwater Foundation’s radar and they reached out to the city about our participation in the program,” Chertudi explained. She was thankful for the upward support she had from her supervisor, the Public Works Director, Mayor, and Council to start the Groundwater Guardian program in Boise.

The rest, as they say, is history, as Boise implemented groundwater programs year after year.

“Groundwater Guardian was a natural fit for our work in protecting and conserving groundwater resources in Boise—the program provided resources, connections and a format to organize and recognize our efforts,” she said.

Boise is a fast growing community with a vibrant downtown area, and is home to the state Capitol and state university. While the growth is good for the economy, it adds stress to infrastructure and the environment. Boise’s population is about 230,000, with more than 600,000 residents in the immediate area. Boise’s drinking water system is privately owned by Suez and is about 75% groundwater dependent.

The Boise Groundwater Guardian team implemented a number of lasting projects under Chertudi’s leadership with other local partners. One of her favorites—and one of the most challenging—was the cleanup of the Esther Simplot Park site. The project, which spanned five months and cost over \$6 million, became a popular city park along Boise’s riverfront and included several groundwater-related issues that needed remediation. She was also involved in creating the largest residential compost collection program in Idaho.

Boise’s youth water education programs evolved into the Boise WaterShed Environmental Education Center, which is the first of its kind in the state. Located at the city’s largest water renewal facility, the Boise WaterShed Center was developed through a public/private partnership with the City of Boise and nonprofit groups. The Center’s educational exhibits cover a wide range of water management issues in the area. More than 15,000 visitors take part in educational activities at the center each year.

These and many other projects made up Boise’s Results-Oriented Activities (ROAs) each year.

Now that she has retired from the City, it’s important to Chertudi that the efforts she spearheaded continue, and plans to stay involved.

“I have volunteered my continued assistance and support of the program

to city managers and will do what I can to assist with the continued efforts to protect and conserve groundwater resources in the community,” she said.

Thankfully, the City has kept good records of the Groundwater Guardian information. Chertudi provided a historical background to her supervisor about the program prior to her retirement, and assisted in assigning the continued responsibility to other team members.

Chertudi says the best part of being part of Groundwater Guardian has been the relationships she’s built with other teams across the U.S. “I met and learned from so many amazing people that I could call or email with questions or ask for ideas or help,” she said. “They made me better at my job and kept me enthusiastic and committed to the hard work we all do at a community level.”

“The best outcome of Boise’s participation in Groundwater Guardian



▲ Catherine Chertudi speaks at the 2017 Groundwater Foundation National Conference in Boise, Idaho in October 2017.

is better informed citizens that are able to reduce waste, properly manage hazardous waste, and conserve water indoors and outside,” Chertudi said.

When asked about her legacy on Boise’s groundwater, she explains, “I didn’t start my career thinking I would leave a legacy, I just wanted to make a difference in my community.”

To find out how you can make a difference in your community and to get involved as a Groundwater Guardian, visit www.groundwater.org/groundwaterguardian. ♦