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Nine years ago, a small group of University of Dayton honor students, faculty and community partners took a kayak trip down the Great Miami River.

Students learned, first-hand, about the river's ecology and water quality, while discussing environmental and social justice issues. But more than anyone could have predicted, they developed a connection with the local waterways and a sense of pride they didn't want to let go.

The trip became an annual event — an orientation for incoming cohorts of students. Beginning at 9:30 a.m. Wednesday, Aug. 14, the largest group of paddlers to date will take the 10th-annual, two-day trip from the Taylorsville Dam to Sunwatch Indian Village.

Along the way, they will take samples of macroinvertebrates from the water, interact with local artists and camp overnight at Island MetroPark. At 11 a.m. Thursday, Aug. 15, at RiverScape they will participate in fish shocking by Five Rivers MetroParks to study the river's water quality and health of its fish.

The trip is only one of the many significant developments that came out of that original paddle in 2004. In the decade that followed, the students along with faculty and community partners:

- Formed the University of Dayton Rivers Institute in 2006, a student-led organization sponsored by the Fitz Center for Leadership in Community that is providing the energy and focus for reuniting Dayton with its rivers. Community partners include the Miami Conservancy District, Five Rivers MetroParks and the City of Dayton Department of Water.
- Created the RiverMobile, a traveling exhibit converted from a semitrailer that highlights the history, benefits and ecology of the Great Miami River watershed. Funded primarily by local donors, it will visit area schools beginning this fall.
- Launched an annual River Summit, bringing together governmental, agricultural and community leaders from cities along the river's 96-mile stretch to develop a cohesive vision for recreation and development. The Ohio's Great Corridor Association grew out of this summit and meets throughout the year to continue regional collaboration around the watershed.
- Launched a bike rental program at the University known as RecBikes, which has recorded nearly 5,000 daily checkouts since 2011. The RecBikes program also led to the development of an Outdoor Engagement Center on campus, opening this fall.
- Implemented a University-wide campaign to promote the use of reusable water bottles and local tap water.
- Sponsored numerous kayak trips down the Great Miami River for regional leaders, citizens and visitors.

While the River Stewards — the students who participate in the Rivers Institute — would be the first to admit they are just one partner among many in the region's development of its waterways, community partners give them credit for providing the enthusiasm and the leadership for igniting change.

Dusty Hall, senior director, Southwestern Ohio Council for Higher Education

Dusty Hall has been kayaking the Miami Valley's waterways since the 1960s, so when he was asked to accompany that first group of honor students down the Great Miami River, he didn't hesitate to say yes.

Looking back, he sees it was a wake-up call for the region.

"Interest in the river has had fits and starts since the recovery of the 1913 flood," Hall said. "This time, it's being sustained, and it is spurring innovation and investments that will endure. What's the difference? It's the River Stewards' persistence, enthusiasm and insistence on change, and the way the University of Dayton institutionalized this effort with the Rivers Institute."

In just 10-short years, the community is returning to its rivers, Hall said. Communities are working together, new partnerships and organizations are forming, and the river is being viewed as a recreational asset and economic development tool.

"We can't make excuses about not having mountains and beaches, because what we have is every bit as good," he said. And
with the economic development comes new jobs. Combined with the recreational assets, the region is becoming a viable place for new graduates to stay to live, work and play.

"And now you see other colleges and universities looking to repeat the kind of success the Rivers Institute has had, getting students to become engaged in building up their communities," he said.

Janet Bly, general manager, Miami Conservancy District

When a collaborative of local organizations that have environmental concerns needed an intern, Janet Bly knew immediately who to turn to.

"Every year, I continue to be impressed with the students in the Rivers Institute," Bly said.

Now, a River Steward works hand in hand with the Greater Dayton Partners for the Environment to coordinate the work of more than 60 organizations that seek to protect, restore, preserve and promote the environmental and agricultural resources in the Great Miami River and Little Miami River watersheds.

Perhaps one of the most important contributions of the Rivers Institute has been to excite and engage young people with the rivers, Bly said. From the creation of the RiverMobile, to creating a campus-wide campaign to encourage students to drink tap water from reusable bottles, to organizing kayak trips down the Great Miami River, students from all over the country are coming to see the river system as an asset.

"Having young college students see Dayton as a desirable place to live is critical for our success," Bly said. "Their interest has helped raise funds for the River Run expansion at RiversScape MetroPark and expand the bikeway system into one of the largest in the Midwest. The River Stewards have become essential to the community's enthusiasm for the rivers."

Bernie Farley, co-owner, Whitewater Warehouse

When Bernie Farley and Jeryl Yantis opened Whitewater Warehouse downtown in 1994, they had a dream of connecting people with the rivers. Farley said the leadership of the River Stewards over the last decade has helped make that dream a reality.

"The river is the lifeblood of this community," Farley said. "And the River Stewards, along with other local groups, have raised awareness for the necessity of using and taking care of this vital resource."

He said the river benefits from both the water quality sampling the Stewards do and the increase in recreational activity they've spurred. Problems and pollutants are caught early and contained quickly.

And as a lifelong resident who has traveled the region's waterways for nearly 60 years, he's happy to see more people coming out to enjoy them as well.

"It's really good to see young adults outside, getting grass stains on their jeans and dirt under their fingernails," he said.

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