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Youth Group, Three Others Win 2013 Pelican Awards

A program for low-income children in Elizabeth City won a 2013 Pelican Award from the N.C. Coastal Federation for its environmental work.

The River City CDC YouthBuild program was among the four winners of Pelican Awards along the northeast coast. Others were: Columbia; Kendall Smith of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and James Barrie Gaskill and Gene Ballance, commercial fishermen on Ocracoke.

Thirteen people, groups and businesses across North Carolina won awards this year. The annual Pelican Awards recognize exemplary action to protect and preserve the coastal environment. The winners will receive the awards today at a luncheon at the Duke Marine Lab near Beaufort.

“These awards are our way of recognizing extraordinary commitment to protecting and preserving our coast,” said Todd Miller, the federation’s founder and executive director. “We should never underestimate the power that many people bring to the effort of assuring that our coast remains a healthy and vibrant place. We can’t thank them enough.”

The YouthBuild program of the River City Community Development Corporation provides low-income kids educational opportunities and employment skills through training and meaningful work in their communities. The federation collaborated with the program last year to take students out to explore coastal habitats and to help with federation projects.

Students rolled up their sleeves to weed mulch and replant rain gardens; bag and distribute bags of oyster shells to create oyster reefs; and plant grasses to build marshes. Field work was coordinated with environmental lessons and activities that supported earning students their high-school diplomas.

Officials at Columbia, a small town on the Scuppernong River in Tyrrell County, began talking with the staff of the federation about the benefits of low-impact development, or LID. It's a method of stormwater control that tries to maintain or mimic the land's natural hydrology. Those talks blossomed into a productive collaboration that included the town, a 12-member technical review team and federation staff. Through night meetings, emails and relentless edits, the town never waived in its commitment to create a manual that outlined alternative ways for developers and residents to manage stormwater.

Smith has been a long-time federation partner, helping advance many wetland restoration and water quality projects in the northeast coastal region. He was helped plan a successful pilot restoration project in Hyde County that created 600 acres of wetlands. Smith also helped build a boardwalk at the Manteo Elementary School that enhances students' access to and use of a rain garden. He also collaborated to develop a cost-share program that encourages landowners to restore Atlantic white cedar on their property.

Beacon Island in the Pamlico Sound is one of only nine remaining nesting sites in North Carolina for brown pelicans. Springer's Point Nature Preserve also on Ocracoke is a local cultural landmark and the reputed hideout of renowned pirate, Blackbeard. But these two coastal areas were threatened by shoreline erosion.

Gaskill and Ballance have been key to halting the erosion by restoring oyster reefs around Beacon Island and Springer's Point. Together, they filled thousands of bags of recycled oyster shells that they then used to build sills that buffer the shorelines. While helping to protect the islands from erosion, this living shoreline is also providing valuable habitat and improving water quality.

But James Barrie's and Gene's contribution is not all brawn and muscle. For many years, their knowledge of the water, local fishing history and maritime skills have significantly advanced oyster restoration efforts throughout North Carolina. These commercial fishermen are key members of the Ocracoke Working Watermen's Association and the Ocracoke Preservation Society, and were part of the team that devised a plan to save these areas.