News
EarthBeat



Chad Pregracke who established Living Lands & Waters, an environmental organization, in 1998, is pictured in an undated photo collecting garbage along the Ohio River. He has been named the Pacem in Terris Peace and Freedom Award winner for 2024. (OSV News/courtesy Pacem in Terris)

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Chad Pregracke of East Moline, Illinois, who is recognized worldwide for energizing people to join him in cleaning up rivers and planting trees, will receive the Pacem in Terris Peace and Freedom Award, an interfaith award overseen by the Catholic Diocese of Davenport.

He is the first recipient in the interfaith award's 60-year-history to receive recognition for work on environmental justice and care for creation.

Bishop Dennis G. Walsh, the new bishop of Davenport, will present the award Dec. 3 at 7 p.m. at St. Ambrose University in Davenport.

Pregracke, 49, established Living Lands & Waters, an environmental organization, in 1998 in his hometown along the Mississippi River. He and his staff host river cleanups, watershed conservation initiatives, workshops and tree plantings, among other conservation efforts. Countless volunteers join them in these activities.

"Care for our common home, so much a part of Chad's life work, is related closely to peace and justice," said Deacon Kent Ferris, social action director for the Diocese of Davenport. In much the same way Laudato Si' reminds us of the importance of being in right relationship with God, our neighbor and the created world, Chad's work helps us see what is possible in undoing the damage humankind has done.

"He has also masterfully captured the essence of subsidiarity, that there is the means of making decisions, of living differently in our own locale. The momentum towards being in a right relationship with God, neighbor and the created world is a beautiful, powerful thing."

Pregracke was not familiar with the Pacem award until Kim Guy, Living Lands & Waters executive assistant and administrative coordinator filled him in on the details. She told him about some of the past recipients, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day, St. Teresa of Kolkata, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Cesar Chavez and the Dalai Lama among them.

"It's a super honor to be recognized. I don't expect it and don't seek it out," Pregracke said, during a phone interview with The Catholic Messenger, Davenport's diocesan newspaper, while waiting to catch a plane to Detroit for a river project that involves removal of an invasive plant.

A CNN Hero of the Year in 2013, he is accepting the Pacem award for the same reason he has accepted other awards: "It highlights the work. I know my name will be on it, but I accept it on behalf of all the people who made it happen — literally 132,000 people (all of the volunteers over 26 years)."

Since Living Lands & Waters' beginning, crews and volunteers have removed 13.44 million pounds of trash from America's rivers with more than 131,000 volunteers engaged in that effort. More than 28,000 students have been educated and crews and volunteers have planted more than 2 million trees.

Among the volunteers are St. Ambrose students who have participated in alternative spring break cleanups almost every year and helped with tree wrappings, Guy said.

"We've worked on 23 rivers in 22 states. … There's a lot of garbage out there," said Pregracke, who began picking up trash along the Mississippi River when he was a kid. "It doesn't get discouraging. We're there to make a difference. You get to bring a lot of people together and see instantaneously the difference you've made. … Teamwork is what it's all about. That's what gets stuff done."

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The tree-planting effort began years ago along the Mississippi River in Burlington, Iowa.

"I believe a hunting club had just logged silver maple off of an island. They asked us to do tree planting of hardwoods in the same fashion as we did our cleanups," Pregracke recalled.

That tree planting inspired the Million Trees project to further Living Lands & Waters' mission to protect, preserve and restore the natural environment of America's major rivers and watersheds.

"I think his impact is huge. He has motivated so many volunteers. A lot of us have helped in some way or another," said Kathy Wine, founder of River Action Inc., based in Davenport. "I think his energy brought a lot of attention to water quality that hadn't been first and foremost on people's minds. He opened eyes when he brought out a barge filled with all of the things pulled out of the river."

Business owner Ryan Lightfoot of the Fort Madison area has a big plate boat and volunteered his services some 15 to 20 years ago for Living Lands & Waters. He even built boats for Pregracke, whose commitment to environmental stewardship, Lightfoot said, goes beyond cleaning up rivers to providing classes for students and seminars for teachers.

"We used to have our own cleanups in Fort Madison but there's no trash (left) to pick up. I blame Chad for that. … He's making a huge difference," Lightfoot joked.

Living Lands & Waters created two "floating classrooms," one dedicated to ecology on the river and the second on river-related careers, Pregracke said. In the first classroom, "we frame the (Mississippi River) as a 2,300-mile corridor for wildlife." In the second, newest classroom, "we frame the river as 2,300 miles of opportunity."

The fleet has grown to include four barges, two towboats, five workboats, two skid steers, six work trucks, a crane and an excavator, which works great for removing cars from the river. The crew discovered 52 cars in the Ohio River in Pittsburgh and removed them in four days, Pregracke said. "I just bought a barge equal to the size of all of our barges so I can load it up" with the big trash — cars and boats. "Cars go to scrap yards and boats get cut up. They can't be recycled. Most of the stuff we bring in (from river clean-ups) is all recycled."

Living Lands & Waters' crew and volunteers have pulled millions of pounds of plastics from America's rivers. Finding a facility to process the large, bulky, rigid plastics for recycling was a huge challenge.

That reality and the discovery that 43% of all slow-growing hardwood trees were cut down for single-use wood pallets motivated Pregracke and his wife, Tammy Becker, to establish Green Current Solutions. The certified women-owned and managed business manufactures 100% recycled plastic pallets.

Father Ken Kuntz, former diocesan administrator of the Davenport Diocese, wrote the letter informing Pregracke of the award.

"Your expression of care for our common home is at its very core a profound expression of peace and justice," the priest said, "and is befitting of the words of Pope John XXIII as 'a spark of light, a center of love, a vivifying leaven' to your brothers and sisters around the world."