

WORKING TOGETHER TO PREPARE FOR WEATHER

The Young Meteorologist WeatherFest and Libraries Team up

In January 2009, a major ice storm hit the Northwest Arkansas area causing over 100,000 people to be without power, some for up to two weeks before being restored. The storm drowned over 3,000 trees in the city of Fayetteville, AR alone and resulted in more than \$80 million dollars in damage across the region.

The Fayetteville Public Library (FPL) in Fayetteville, Arkansas opened its doors for the community during its time of need during the storm. The library's power supply provided heat, water, WiFi access, and electricity for recharging laptops and smartphones. The library's support kept the community connected.



“The ice storm was one of the most intense weather disasters in our community that I can remember,” shares Lolly Greenwood, FPL Youth Services Director, “We were proud to be ready and prepared to assist the community in any way we could.”

Greenwood drew upon her memories of the storm when approached a few years later by Christian Garcia, a University of Arkansas student and PLAN!T NOW Science Advisory Board President, with the goal of educating Fayetteville kids about severe weather preparedness.

PLAN!T NOW, a nonprofit organization formed in 2004 originally as the Grenada Relief Fund, established after Hurricane Ivan devastated the island nation, advocates for the power of preparedness. The organization educates communities, individuals, and youth about how to prepare for severe weather through its interactive online game, The Young Meteorologist Program (YMP). YMP is a collaboration between the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the National Weather Service (NWS), and PLAN!T NOW.

Garcia wanted to teach local students about severe weather preparedness with the YMP online game and reached out to his local library for assistance. “We had never done a severe weather prep event before and it had not been on our radar to offer that to the community,” remembers Greenwood. Liking the idea and knowing her youth community, she helped form a partnership with the local Boys & Girls Club to host an after school event at the library. This first preparedness event was held in 2013 with six students, and the program and local partnerships have continued to grow.

Seeing the potential to reach more members of the community, Greenwood reached out to local KNWA/FOX 24 Chief Meteorologist, Dan Skoff, (aka Dan The Weatherman) to help grow the event. “My husband and I are huge weather watchers! We watch the local weather forecasts and connect with the meteorologist as familiar faces that care about their communities,” Greenwood explained.

Dan, the Weatherman attests that, “On average, the Northwest Arkansas/River Valley area will experience about 30-40 severe weather events in a given year, with about 10 of those being significant and life threatening. Severe weather in this part of the country can occur at ANY time of the day and year, with some of the most significant tornado outbreaks occurring in the heart of winter, or in the dead of night.” That is why it’s best to be ALWAYS prepared, so you will know what to do if life-threatening weather is bearing down on you when you least expect it.

One of the most important jobs of a Meteorologist is preparing the community for a weather disaster. That includes everyone from the elderly, to families and their children. “Partnering with the Fayetteville Public Library in the YMP Weatherfest is the perfect way to help reach the younger generation and emphasize the importance of being prepared for nature’s worst,” declares Dan.



On April 11, 2015 the library welcomed over 250 kids, teens, and adults to the first Young Meteorologist WeatherFest. The half day festival included a variety of weather related activities, demonstrations of a tornado machine, simulations of flood plan models, displays of the latest high-tech KNWA Storm Spotter vehicles, the YMP online meteorology game, a special weather presentation by Skoff and the KNWA Storm Spotter team, a chance to be a weather star on FPL-TV, and an opportunity to meet “Owlie Skywarn”, the NOAA/National Weather Service’s mascot.

“After our event last year, we received only positive feedback with people saying, ‘Please do it again. We loved the info and the game!’” commented Greenwood.

An event on April 9, 2016 is already in the works for Fayetteville. The festival will feature more local partnerships and involve meteorologists from all the local television stations and the Tulsa, Oklahoma NWS office.

Libraries’ educational role in their communities makes them perfect partners for helping prepare their communities for severe weather. The partnership model set forth by FPL and supported by Garcia, now a graduate from the University of Arkansas and current Director of Information and Youth Initiatives with PLAN!T NOW, along with a team including Donna Lee, Rally Coordinator and founder of PLAN!T NOW, and Ron Grid, an Outreach Manager with NOAA, is being replicated in libraries large and small throughout the country in 2016.

“Because we share the same goals of outreach and education, library partnerships like the one that developed with FPL have helped the Young Meteorologist Program grow and set a strong foundation for the future,” noted Lee. Libraries planning 2016 WeatherFests include Detroit, MI; Tupelo, MS; Miami, FL; Las Cruces, NM; Huntsville, AL; and Los Angeles, CA.