



Madison Conservation Dinner Funds Come Full Circle

BY KATE NATION



The USA and Union volunteers dedicated the refurbished Vilas Park fishing pier on Sept. 14.

Dinners are a key ingredient of many fundraising events and have a proven track record of raising funds for worthy causes. Yet it's not uncommon for a disconnect to develop between spending money on a good meal and social interaction and seeing the tangible, positive impact of those dollars at work.

That, however, was not the case at the USA's 6th Annual Madison Area Conservation Dinner on September 14. That same morning, USA staff, volunteers from the Building and Construction Trades Council of South Central Wisconsin (BTC), park staff and members of the community gathered at Vilas Park in Madison, Wisconsin, to dedicate a restored fishing pier made possible by funds from the USA's annual dinner.

Through the USA's Work Boots on the Ground program, more than 50 union volunteers transformed Vilas Park's original floating fishing pier—which was languishing in disrepair in a city storage yard—into a safe structure accessible to residents of all physical abilities. Volunteers coordinated transportation of the pier to a local Union shop where numerous repairs were made. Volunteers and Union contractors also designed and constructed a pier abutment as well as a new sidewalk and steps on the edge of popular Lake Wingra in preparation for the pier installation.

"The Building Trades Council has been working with the Union Sportsmen's Alliance for years to raise funds for conservation projects and Take Kids Fishing youth events," said Dave Branson, Vilas Park project leader and executive director of the Building Trades Council of South Central Wisconsin. "We feel this fishing pier was a good project to give back to the community and make the lake accessible to everyone."

Madison dinner attendees were able to see how their participation directly improved public access to the outdoors

through a slideshow illustrating the stages of the Vilas Park project culminating in the dedication that morning.

The dinner also served as the perfect opportunity for USA Conservation Manager Rob Stroede and Events Manager Kevin Grubbs to honor Branson with the USA's 2018 United Association (UA) Conservation Steward of the Year Award for his exemplary commitment to conservation and community service.

Branson, a member of UA Local 434, has been a driving force for the USA's Madison dinner and has spearheaded or been involved in countless USA conservation projects and youth outreach events in Wisconsin. From Take Kids Fishing Day in Madison and Janesville to roofing a picnic pavilion at Horicon Marsh to constructing a tower for the endangered chimney swift to the Vilas Park pier, Branson has poured his time and energy into projects that benefit his community.

"Fundraising dinners build relationships between members of different AFL-CIO unions, while raising money to complete projects in our community," Branson explained. "Plus, holding outreach events and completing beneficial projects improves relationships between Unions and the public, by reminding people that Union members are friends and neighbors who enjoy giving back to our hometowns."

Since the USA's inaugural Madison dinner in 2013, the event has raised more than \$325,000 and helped recruit volunteers for many of the USA's local conservation projects and events.



USA Events Manager Kevin Grubbs (R) presents Dave Branson (L) with the UA Conservation Steward of the Year award.