



# upstream pittsburgh

# 2025 IN REVIEW



From left to right: Rayden Sorock (UpstreamPgh board member), Lauren Basing (Shiftworks Community + Public Arts), Erica Jackson (UpstreamPgh), Marlana Vassar (artist), Aniyah Valentine and Amber Williams (East Hills residents), Diane Daniels (East Hills Consensus Group), Donna Smith (East Hills resident and Neighborhood Leader), and Mike Hiller (UpstreamPgh) unveil "Sankofa Garden: Roots to a Brighter Future" at a community celebration in November. Photo by Nathan J Shaulis



# A Letter from Executive Director, Mike Hiller

We did it. We made it through 2025. For those of us who care deeply about people, the environment, our country, and our shared global future, it was not an easy year. The challenges were real and often heavy, impacting our work, our partners, and the communities we serve. And yet, in the face of shifting systems and uncertainty, we doubled down on our commitment to climate justice and clean water. This work does not pause when systems change; in fact, those very changes make our mission even more urgent and necessary.

In 2025, UpstreamPgh expanded its impact well beyond the Nine Mile Run Watershed. We stepped into stewardship of the Negley Run Watershed Task Force, bringing our values, experience, and brand to a neighboring watershed. Our Environmental Justice Table grew into the Mon Valley with the addition of Homestead Mayor Mary Nesby, deepening our presence in an underinvested and heavily polluted region of Allegheny County. On a national level, we strengthened partnerships through our leadership in the Healthy Rivers Coalition, helping to bring critical federal resources to the Ohio River Watershed, including Pittsburgh.

This expansion did not come at the expense of our core work. Alongside our longtime partners PGH United and the Our Water Table, we led a successful ballot referendum ensuring the City of Pittsburgh’s water system remains publicly owned in perpetuity. We also launched two historic planning efforts: The Fern Hollow Creek Comprehensive Water Resources Master Plan with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and Ripple: the Nine Mile Run Environmental Justice Watershed Plan. Together, these plans lay out a unified, justice-centered vision for the watershed over the next 25 years.

All of this momentum positions us for continued success in 2026 and beyond. Leadership, resilience, and trailblazing define our legacy. Founded in 2001, UpstreamPgh enters 2026 as our 25th anniversary year. We invite you to join us in a year-long celebration honoring our supporters—without whom this work would not be possible.

In Solidarity,

## Engage



**Erica Jackson**

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### Ripple: Nine Mile Run Environmental Justice Watershed Plan

The Engage program was boots on the ground for Ripple, UpstreamPgh’s environmental justice plan for the Nine Mile Run Watershed. With the help of Neighborhood Leaders, we knocked on roughly 230 doors and attended 23 local events like farmers markets and community days. We learned about flooding in places like Montier Street and Frankstown Ave, and heard about people’s frustration with trash, abandoned homes, and basement floods. We’re using this feedback to plan new green infrastructure sites, and we’re looking forward to releasing the plan in early 2026!

*“In an unpredictable world, I felt uplifted by all of the changemakers we connected with in 2025!”*

- Erica



*Unveiling of “Sankofa Garden: Roots to a Brighter Future”  
Photo by Nathan J Shaulis*

As a small organization, we rely on our connections to make a bigger impact, and in 2025, the Engage Program connected with a lot of people!

#### Education

We held school programs with several schools in the Nine Mile Run watershed like Dickson STEAM Academy and the Environmental Charter School, reaching around 800 unique students throughout the year. In the classroom, we explored watershed models and green infrastructure, and in Frick Park we volunteered, surveyed the stream and saw a record number of snakes!

#### Volunteers

Keith Moore, our Ecosystems Program Coordinator, led the charge on a great 2025 volunteer season, with over 500 people getting out to plant native species, remove invasives, pick up trash, and assist with education programming! I’m always impressed with the generosity of our volunteers; even the thorniest multiflora rose can’t deter our mighty crew. Together, we’re restoring native habitat throughout the watershed for a healthier, more climate-resilient ecosystem.

#### Sankofa Garden: Roots to a Brighter Future

In the fall, we celebrated the installation of Sankofa Garden: Roots to a Brighter Future at our Dornbush Rain Garden in East Hills. Working with the artist Marlana Adele Vassar and with East Hills neighbors on this project and the garden was a major highlight of my year, and I’m excited to see the art shine as the garden continues to grow!



# Advocate



**Chavaysha Chaney**  
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## A Growing Team, Expanding Our Reach

2025 was a year of growth for UpstreamPgh's Advocacy Team. In January, we welcomed Jo Anne Tippet, Advocacy Coordinator, and Chief Pomaj-Chakmam-Yajalaji, Advocacy Consultant to our team.

In Summer 2025, we welcomed Mary Nesby as our new Mon Valley Advocacy Manager, marking a major milestone in expanding the Environmental Justice Table's (EJT) reach. Mary now oversees the EJT and leads our efforts to deepen campaign work throughout the Mon Valley. Since she joined the team, we've expanded the table of residents from Duquesne, Clairton, and Homestead who are eager to shape environmental justice priorities in their communities. Mary's leadership has strengthened our presence, sharpened our strategy, and brought new energy to our regional organizing.

## Environmental Justice Table (EJT)

In 2025, the Environmental Justice Table (EJT) focused on two campaigns: Establish Water Equity & Accountability with Mon Valley Water Companies and the Deconstruction Campaign, with conversations in Homewood, Clairton, East Liberty, and McKeesport, creating space for residents to shape the direction of our work and elevate the issues most impacting their neighborhoods. The EJT also led 30 advocacy engagements, including 20 canvassing days, 4 community listening sessions, 2 open houses, meetings with elected officials, and participation in regional events.

## State Revolving Fund Cohort (SRF)

After participating in a national State Revolving Fund (SRF) Cohort hosted by River Network, we expanded our role in the SRF coalition. Creating a similar model, we now lead a cohort to connect communities to critical water infrastructure funding. Borough leaders from Wilkinsburg, Braddock and Homestead, learn to navigate state agencies, identify funding pathways, and strengthen long-term planning for water system improvements.

## Our Water Table (OWT)

A major highlight this year was our growing collaboration with partners such as OWT, Clean Water Action, and Pittsburgh United including our promotion for the successful May 20<sup>th</sup> Ballot Referendum to Keep Pittsburgh's Water Public and Get the Lead Out Week, expanding resident voices within the utility sector, where we are helping elevate water equity conversations across the region.

## Healthy Waters Coalition

In November, UpstreamPgh, along with over 120 local, state, and national conservation organizations, launched the Healthy Waters Coalition, working to restore and protect the interconnected waters of the Ohio River Basin. Their mission is to advocate for a watershed-wide restoration plan and federal funding to implement it.



Neighborhood Lead, Donna Smith engages with residents for the Ripple Environmental Justice Watershed Plan Survey

## Fern Hollow Vision Plan / Fern Hollow Creek Comprehensive Water Resources Master Plan

Since 2024, we've worked with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to survey Fern Hollow, develop an existing conditions model, and identify "alternatives" that could help to restore flow and function to Fern Hollow Creek, identifying opportunities for stream reconnection and restoration. In November, we brought on local engineering design firm Ethos Collaborative to review and refine the proposed alternatives and work towards conceptual design drawings for public feedback. Stay tuned for updates in the spring!

## Ripple: Nine Mile Run Environmental Justice Watershed Plan

Ripple is our first watershed plan since incorporation in 2001, designed to address long-standing watershed issues while recognizing the stark environmental injustices in our watershed and directing long-overdue investment to underserved communities. Developed with our talented team of Neighborhood Leaders, steering committee, and consultants from evolve:ea, Ethos Collaborative, and Black Girl Green World, the plan envisions a better watershed centered in a people first approach to developing nature-based solutions. The 1998 Nine Mile Run Rivers Conservation Plan shaped our first 25 years just as Ripple will guide the next 25.

## Crescent Inlet Repair

In 2025, we worked with local partners to replace a broken stormwater inlet at our Crescent School Rain Garden, originally completed in 2015. In November, a new cast iron curb inlet and stormwater trench drain were installed, enabling runoff capture from the entire street and doubling the area's stormwater capture. We are currently monitoring the project post-construction to determine if there is an increase in stormwater capture.

# Plan/Build



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In 2025, UpstreamPgh began convening the Negley Run Watershed Task Force (NRWTF) following years of support from the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy.

NRWTF, created in 2017 through the Living Waters of Larimer project, brings together residents, creatives, and technical experts to restore healthy urban ecosystems. Working with the City of Pittsburgh and local agencies, it promotes innovative rainwater management and integrates habitat and biodiversity to strengthen watershed health.

In 2025, we convened three meetings. We will meet quarterly in 2026, all are welcome to attend.



Logo courtesy Living Waters Pittsburgh

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 Western Pennsylvania Coalition for Abandoned Mine Reclamation (WPCAMR)

# VOLUNTEER WITH US!

Enjoy gardening?  
 Spending time in Frick Park?  
 Helping to educate youth?  
 Promoting environmental justice?

Get involved by volunteering with UpstreamPgh and the Environmental Justice Table.

Watch out for our biweekly volunteer days from April to October. We do invasive species control, native plantings, trash cleanups, resource fairs, and more!

**Spring Volunteer Orientation is March 26th!**



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*2025 Year In Review Inside!*

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