Samantha Gentrup is the first full-time executive director of Suncoast Waterkeeper. A retired teacher, she was a founding member of Hands Along the Water, a grassroots environmental group. HERALD-TRIBUNE FILE

Suncoast Waterkeeper hires full-time director

Earle Kimel Sarasota Herald-Tribune
USA TODAY NETWORK

SARASOTA – Suncoast Waterkeeper, an environmental group that keeps tabs on Sarasota Bay and other area waterways, recently named Samantha Gentrup its new executive director.

Gentrup, a retired Charlotte County teacher, was one of the organizers of Hands Along the Water, the volunteer group that raised red tide awareness in 2018.

Gentrup is the first paid employee of the nonprofit, which has a mission of protecting and restoring waterways along the Florida Suncoast. She started March 1.

"Sam understands the interconnectivity of the issues that face us and brings passion and energy to the environmental protection movement," Rusty Chinnis, a member of the Suncoast Waterkeeper board of directors, said in a prepared statement. "We are excited to have her join our team."

Founder Justin Bloom, an environmental attorney and onetime volunteer executive director, had been the most visible face of Suncoast Waterkeeper.

The organization is best known for trying to hold government agencies accountable for environmental impacts, such as by pushing the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to conduct a thorough environmental study prior to offshore dredging or Sarasota County for inadequacies its Bee Ridge Wastewater Reclamation Facility and for repeated spills of raw and partially treated sewage throughout the county's collection system and at its treatment plants. It also conducts water quality monitoring.

"They really established themselves as a litigator; they hold municipalities accountable for water quality. That's pretty much their identity right now," Gentrup said.

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Waterkeeper

As the executive director, Gentrup is charged with helping to expand the current water quality monitoring program, as well as improving public outreach, "so the public and our communities understand what Suncoast Waterkeeper does and why we do it, and continuing to empower people to get involved and building our volunteer base so we have members and volunteers that are actively engaged."

Gentrup was working as a teacher when she, along with several others, started the grassroots group Hands Along the Water as a response to the 18-month-long red tide bloom that impacted the Gulf Coast in 2017 and 2018.

That culminated in an Aug. 12, 2018, event that captured attention through social media and involved almost 10,000 people.

After a brief attempt at becoming a nonprofit, Hands Along the Water is once again a grassroots movement, though volunteers still are available for community efforts.

Suncoast Waterkeeper is part of an alliance of more than 350 waterkeeper and riverkeeper organizations in more than 45 countries.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Visit suncoastwaterkeeper.org

"They meet, they share resources, they're just this network of brothers and sisters that are in this fight together," Gentrup said.

She later stressed that a valuable part of Suncoast Waterkeeper, after the nonprofit raises awareness of problems, is to work with those same agencies to fix them.

"It's a community partnership, really," Gentrup added.

Education programs will include programs for youth, as well as practices homeowners and homeowners associations can follow to improve water quality, similar to those published by the Gulf Coast Community Foundation in its online water quality playbook.

Gentrup is embracing her role as an advocate for Suncoast Waterkeeper.

"I'm excited to be able to brag about Suncoast Waterkeeper," she said.

"Share how devoted the board is, and what a rich history the organization has and what it is that they're doing to really be the caretaker of our water."

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