

## Nomination of Cathy Higley for the 2024 Outstanding Youth Educator Award

### Nominee:

Cathy Higley, Lake Conservation Specialist  
Vilas County Land & Water Conservation Department  
330 Court Street, Eagle River WI 54521  
715-479-3738, [cahigl@vilascountywi.gov](mailto:cahigl@vilascountywi.gov)

### Nominators:

Carolyn Scholl, County Conservationist and Quita Sheehan, Conservation Specialist  
Vilas County Land & Water Conservation Department  
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When the WI Land + Water award announcements came out this year, the first person we thought of was Cathy Higley from the Vilas County Conservation. She has worked for Vilas County Land & Water Conservation since July of 2017, and she has led (and has been growing) our Youth Education program ever since. For anyone who has worked with Cathy, you know that she has the most positive attitude, and she carries that positivity to all of her work duties. Her kind smile is infectious. It can light up a room full of retired Lake Association members as easily as it can for a classroom full of Elementary, Middle-School, or High-School students!

**How is she involved?** Cathy has been a valued member of the Youth Education Committee since 2019. She has also served as the Secretary of the L+W Poster & Speaking subcommittee since 2020. With the help of other committee members, she has created lesson plans on the various poster themes and then shares them with other resource professionals across the state.

In Vilas County, Cathy runs the Land + Water Speaking and Poster contests. She works with several schools and teachers all over the county, with the local homeschool organization, and with a local library for the judging and public display of the posters. She continuously strives to make the contests better and more efficient with each passing year, and then shares what she's learned with other youth education committee members.

Cathy has young children of her own and she encourages them to participate in the speaking contests (Amber Higley won the state high school category speech contest in 2022).

Another big youth education project that Cathy helps organize is the 4<sup>th</sup> grade Lake Ecology Day.

She works with the local 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher to have over 60 4<sup>th</sup> graders spend an entire day on and around a local lake to learn about the various facets of lake ecology. She coordinates with the teachers to structure the activities of the day, then Cathy recruits resource professionals to teach the kids about fish, plants, other aquatic organisms, and how to safely have fun in canoes. This day is a highlight of the school year for some children and Cathy works tirelessly and patiently to coordinate all of the day's events.

**Outstanding Contributions & Exceptional Service:** Cathy adores kids of all ages, she's enthusiastic and jumps in with new ideas to improve the core education programs in the schools. She is also very patient with people (of any age) and will lead them through the "muddy waters" of DNR databases and annual Conservation concepts for poster and speaking (even on Saturdays).

Cathy has a true passion for the wild spaces and wildlife of Vilas County and loves to introduce kids to those habitats and their inhabitants. Her enthusiasm and energy are boundless when she is working on conservation projects with kids. She commits herself to sharing the Poster and Speaking contest with all interested students. This means that she visits several schools and an organization that works with homeschooled children to introduce the annual theme and thoroughly explain the poster concepts. She organizes the judging events in conjunction with a local library, which hosts the display. Following the local events, Cathy happily jumps in to work on the regional and state youth contests.

Through these activities Cathy has developed ties to teachers so that she has become their go to resource for all things conservation. She is frequently asked to assist schools from Eagle River, Phelps, St. Germain, and Arbor Vitae, as well as after school Science Clubs to teach kids about water, soil, and wildlife. Cathy always finds time in her very busy workload to show up with samples, equipment, and models that she has developed herself to convey sometimes complicated ecological concepts so that kids come away with a better understanding and appreciation of the natural world they live in!

Cathy Higley is a most deserving individual for the 2024 Outstanding Youth Educator Award!

Nicole Musial  
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Cathy Higley, Lake Conservation Specialist  
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To whom it may concern,

I have had the incredible opportunity to work with Catherine Higley since I became an educator nine years ago. Mrs. Higley is a true conservation advocate and always instills that love for our beautiful Northwoods in our students.

Each year, Mrs. Higley plans a two-day experience for our 4th grade students. This adventure consists of plankton and aquatic macroinvertebrates, defining the aquatic environment and wetland, riparian, and aquatic plant tour, Wisconsin fish identification and adaptations, and canoeing/kayaking 101. Mrs. Higley contacts staff and organizes the groups. This gives students a once in a lifetime opportunity with hands-on activities.

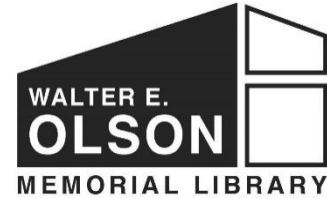
This adventure is a great way to start our school year and get our students ready for a year of conservation education as we continue to build as the year progresses ending in our Annual Conservation Fair.

Mrs. Higley is a pivotal member of our community as a conservationist and an education advocate for students with interests in environmental education. Her constant work with schools and children has made a major impact on our community and helped shape young stewards of conservation. She isn't just a Lake Conservation Specialist, she's an educator, a strong collaborative team member and someone I can count on to help me instill conservation in our future generations. Catherine Higley is the epitome of an Outstanding Youth Educator.

Thank You  
Nicole Musial

December 18, 2023

WI Land+Water  
121 S. Pinckney St., Suite 420  
Madison, WI 53703



To whom it may concern,

I am writing on behalf of the Walter E. Olson Memorial Library in support of the nomination of Catherine Higley for the Brad Matson Youth Education Award. As the Lake Conservation Specialist for our county's Land and Water Conservation Department, Cathy consistently is an excellent driver of community collaboration and direct educational outreach to our community's youth.

Cathy has worked closely with both our Library and the teachers and students of Vilas County for a number of years – including through the pandemic – to provide creative learning opportunities for area youth. In particular, the Library has collaborated with Cathy on the annual Wisconsin Land + Water Conservation Poster and Speaking Contest. We are lucky to be able to exhibit the posters created by Vilas County's budding artists and conservationists, and see high participation each year in this initiative. In addition to communicating and coordinating this program across the multiple school districts, private schools, and homeschooling community, Cathy also hosts workshop days to educate our kids on contemporary conservation issues (and give them a chance to get started on their artwork) to enable them to make meaningful connections between their projects and the natural world of their Northwoods home.

In short, I can – without reservation – recommend Cathy as an outstanding candidate for the Brad Matson Youth Education Award. She is an essential part of the educational ecosystem in Vilas County and is deserving of recognition for her contributions. Many thanks for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sara Klemann". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Sara Klemann (she/her/hers)  
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Student Letter of Support:

To whom it may concern,

Mrs. Higley did an amazing job planning the stations at the overnight field trip. I could tell she was passionate about our learning and making sure it was engaging. We loved all the stations. They were so hands-on!

At the first station that I went to [which was the fish station] we learned about many different fish that live in Wisconsin. We learned about their physical features and how they catch their prey. We also learned what parts of the rivers and lakes that they live in. For example, fish with a certain pattern typically live in different parts of the lake, like a rocky place or somewhere with a lot of plants.

At the next station that we went to, we gathered tiny insects called Plankton from the Lake. First, we took them inside. Next, we put them in a petri dish. Then, we looked at the Plankton under the microscope. And finally, we analyzed the Plankton and other animals living in the water. With a chart and found out their names and other cool information.

Then, we went on a hike up a little Marsh. In the Marsh, we studied mosses, trees and other plants living there. She showed us a really cool moss and a tree that was growing next to a small pond. There was a small ditch where we saw some frogs in their natural habitats.

The next station that we went to was the Lake Station. At the Lake Station we put on large boots and went exploring in the water. We found slimy plants living there. We also found frogs and other insects in the water. Lastly, we looked at a bunch of different plants we found in the water such as different kinds of seaweed and much more.

Finally, the last station that we went to was the canoeing station. Mr. Joe taught us how to be safe on a canoe and how to paddle. When we finally went in the water, He taught us that different amounts of whistles in a row meant different things. For example, three whistles meant to bring all the canoes together because somebody fell out of the boat. After we learned all of that, we were free to roam around the lake in a restricted zone.

From these stations, I learned so much. I have become super passionate about conservation and working to make our world a better place. I hope to be a forester or work for the DNR someday.

Thanks again, Mrs. Higley, for planning our overnight field trip!

Gabrielle Pearson