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Creative Media Writing

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May 2, 2018

Passion for plants sprouts career in nature for ecologist Courtney Masterson

Across the prairie lands of Kansas, many busy bees flutter from wildflower to wildflower. One of these busy bees goes by the name Courtney Masterson. Courtney is an ecologist and botanist and spends most of her time studying native plants, collecting their seeds, and spreading them and their knowledge to the people of her community.

It all started back in 2008 when Courtney began volunteering for the KC Wildlands Ecological Restoration Foundation. Her love and passion for native plants in Kansas only blossomed from there.

“It’s definitely the reason I become an ecologist,” she said.

So Courtney headed to Johnson County Community College (JCCC) and the University of Missouri Kansas City (UMKC) to get her undergraduate degree in environmental science. Her studies eventually transitioned to ecology and then to botany as she started to realize where she wanted her career to be rooted.

“I wanted to be outside, not stuck behind a desk,” she said.

Courtney’s search for education eventually brought her to graduate school at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, where she studied ecology and evolutionary biology. After graduation, it seemed that she was rooted.

Courtney now spends her time out in the field (literally). She travels out to native grass prairies to collect seeds for research and redistribution. Courtney hopes that the seeds she collects will be planted to help maintain native plant populations in Kansas.

Courtney also spends time teaching field botany at the University of Kansas and natural science classes at JCCC. She travels around Douglas and Johnson counties in Kansas and Jackson County in Missouri, bringing conservation information to the community. Her goal is to educate people about native plants and cultivate a respect and understanding for them.

On top of all the work she does teaching the community, Courtney has helped implement several ecological changes to communities in Kansas. She helped the Lawrence City Parks and Recreation Department create native plant gardens across the city. Although officials in that city were skeptical at first, Lawrence now maintains five such gardens and the department has requested six more be placed, all over the course of a few years.

Courtney's conservation work doesn't stop at just plants. She's helped implement several riparian zones along the Kaw (Kansas) River, thanks to the help of a grant from the Heritage Conservation Foundation. Riparian zones are areas of vegetation bordering rivers and bodies of surface water that help reduce erosion and filter runoff.

Courtney's love for conservation and native plants runs so deep that she founded an entire organization around it. That's called the Kaw Valley Native Plant Coalition (KVNPC).

According to its Facebook page, the KVNPC "coordinates the efforts of organizations promoting the greater use and appreciation of native plant systems through public education, collaboration, and demonstration." Courtney is immensely proud of the work the KVNPC has done in Kansas.

The KVNPC hosts events across the area from Topeka to Jackson County, Missouri. The organization holds panels, discussions, and seminars for people interested in learning more about native plants and about how to bring them to their backyards.

Courtney plans to continue adding to her long list of achievements. Most recently, she was awarded the Rising Star Award from the Kansas Association for Conservation and Environmental Education (KACEE) for her outstanding contribution to conservation.

As for the future, Courtney plans to continue educating and assisting people interested in learning more about native plants. She's passionate about saving them and wants people to see the benefits of native plant survival. Even though she's been studying them for over a decade, Courtney's love for the native plants of Kansas won't go away anytime soon. Expect to see more of her and her organization's work in the future.