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Gurnee Resident's Firm Wins Prestigious GreenWorks Award – Helps to Green Northern Illinois

In Academy Awards-style anticipation, the room full of “green” architects, developers, contractors, city officials and others among a veritable who’s who in Chicago’s environmental building movement waited to hear who would win the next 2007 GreenWorks Award for Green Products and Services from the City of Chicago. The winner: WRD Environmental, an 11-year-old ecological consulting firm run by **Gurnee resident Geoff Deigan**.

WRD had won for the Michigan Avenue “Fish Hotel,” a floating fish habitat it had created for the nonprofit Friends of the Chicago River. Easily visible from the Michigan Avenue Bridge, the sustainably designed Fish Hotel is both a destination for fish and a chance to educate passersby about native ecosystems and habitat restoration.

The innovativeness of the design is one of the aspects about it that caught the judges’ attention. “Your projects reinforce Chicago’s mission of leading by example,” Chicago Mayor Daley, whose goal is to make Chicago the greenest city in the nation, told the GreenWorks winners.

Preventing environmental damage

In a way, that’s WRD’s mission, too. After working at an engineering firm in environmental remediation for many years, WRD founder Deigan wanted to be involved in preventing environmental damage, rather than cleaning it up. So he launched WRD in 1997 to design, build, manage and consult on sustainable landscapes for commercial, municipal and nonprofits clients. **Grayslake’s renowned Prairie Crossing** conservation community and **Prairie Crossing Charter School**, the first certified green school in Illinois, are two WRD clients. Others include the City of Chicago Department of Environment and the Lincoln Park Zoo.

“A lot of people ask us, “What is sustainable development,”” says Deigan. “And you’ll get a lot of different answers. But green professionals generally agree that at its simplest being sustainable means serving today’s needs without sacrificing the needs of future generations. And as a parent, I really take that to heart.”

Valuable mix of skills

Beach Park resident Ernesto Huaracha, has been with the firm six years and was recently promoted to director of build services from project manager. Huaracha provides WRD with a unique mix of skills. With degrees in horticulture and environmental sciences, extensive experience in sustainable construction practices and work in design, he bridges WRD’s design and construction teams.

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“Ernesto contributes his considerable horticultural knowledge to the ecological design process to ensure that the right plant is selected for the right place,” says Deigan. “Then, intimately understanding the design intent of a project, he draws on his specialty in sustainable construction to be sure that all installation decisions support the landscape design.”

Huaracha has also consulted on several northern Illinois landfill sitings, assessing their landscape plans for environmental friendliness and long-term suitability

Managing stormwater

Thom Boyd, of Wilmette, is WRD’s director of business development. A recent project Thom helped land for WRD is the Douglas-Hart Nature Center, in downstate Mattoon. There, WRD is applying a new approach it has developed to managing stormwater, using a combination of traditional paving, more recently introduced porous paving and natural landscape elements to prevent flooding on site during rainstorms. The approach conserves water, too, re-circulating it in the landscape.

What’s next for WRD? “We’re always looking for ways to integrate education into our work,” says Deigan. “For instance, at Prairie Crossing Charter School, we designed the school grounds to be an environmentally friendly, curriculum-based hands-on learning lab for students. Children step out of their classroom doors to learn about wildlife habitat, conservation, biodiversity and even, with some gardening projects they’ve done, business skills like planning, cost estimating and project management.

“There’s never a shortage of lessons you can learn from nature.”

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