PROJECT LEARNING TREE SOUTH CAROLINA

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Roper Mountain Science Center Named SC PLT Leadership in Education Award Recipient

COLUMBIA — Roper Mountain Science Center in Greenville has received the 2024 South Carolina Project Learning Tree Jerry L. Shrum Leadership in Education Award. The environmental education center was selected by the South Carolina PLT Steering Committee in May.

Under the leadership of Roper Mountain Environmental Science Chair Tim Taylor and Adjunct Instructor Carrie Whitlock, Roper Mountain becomes the first organization to receive the award since its inception in 1997.

Whitlock has been a PLT facilitator for most of Roper Mountain's workshops and has served as the coordinator for the SC PLT Environmental Education Center program. Taylor has been instrumental in coordinating workshops, giving tours to visitors and furnishing materials to educators as a part of the SC PLT EE Center program.

Roper Mountain Science Center education staff

"I find such joy in sharing PLT with educators because not only do I get to pass on valuable, easy-to-implement lessons they can use in their classroom, but I get to see them have a blast while participating in the lessons," Whitlock said. "Seeing educators from varied backgrounds giggling joyously as they are grabbing resources off the ground while pretending to be a tree is just the icing on the cake. The real treat is knowing that they are passing on not just a love for nature but the idea of being responsible for it."

Roper Mountain has been a steadfast supporter of SC PLT over the years and became an official SC PLT EE Center in 2018, which involves housing and checking out PLT tree trunks full of lesson resources to educators who have been trained in the PLT programs.

Since 2017, Roper Mountain has hosted and facilitated numerous PLT workshops, including a two-day triple facilitator training between PLT, Project Wild and Project WET, a PLT facilitator refresher, early childhood and K-8 teacher professional development workshops and two E-unit workshops for the Greenville County School District P.L.U.S. Institute for fifth-grade teachers learning to teach about ecosystems.

Roper Mountain integrates forestry education and PLT topics to students and the public in several ways. In 2007, Roper Mountain partnered with tree farmer Dr. Walt McPhail and Georgia-Pacific to secure funds for a sustainable forestry practices mural of a working tree farm in their ecology lab. This working forest mural has been a teaching tool for Forestry scouting merit badge classes, Webelos Forester/ Into the Woods scouting badge classes and Clemson Extension forestry classes. Some of Roper Mountain's summer nature camp instructors also utilize PLT activities from the PLT tree trunks.

"Through PLT, teachers are helping to mold the future stewards of our environment," Whitlock said. "Teaching students how to think about the natural world is crucial to getting them involved and getting them to care. PLT enables educators to hit their standards in a fun and easy way while encouraging kids to get outside and spend more time in nature. I wish I had these lessons when I was in the general classroom!"

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Project Learning Tree is a nationwide, award-winning environmental education program that supplements curricula used by teachers, parents, and community leaders for students from preschool to 12th grade. A program of the Sustainable Forestry Initiative, PLT uses trees and forests as windows on the world to advance environmental literacy and promote stewardship to students while fostering professional development among the educators who use it. In South Carolina, PLT is sponsored by the Forestry Association of South Carolina's SC Forestry Foundation, the SC Forestry Commission and the State Department of Education.