

Ashley Dang

TEEA 2018 Winner: Individual



A Force for Nature

For Ashley Dang, helping students develop an appreciation for the environment just comes naturally. After graduating from Cornell University and conducting ecology-based work in other states, Ashley found her way to Trinity, Texas where she teaches at Houston ISD's Outdoor Education Center (OEC). The OEC is a four-day and three-night residential program for Houston ISD fifth-graders.

Beyond leading hands-on outdoor learning activities, Ashley uses her enthusiasm, and the center's natural setting, to inspire students to be aware of the connection between all things in nature, and to encourage them to become stewards of the environment.

Since her arrival at the OEC in 2014, she has made a tremendous impact on the quality of the program through the implementation of new projects and the expansion of others. Using her passion for conservation, Ashley strengthened the facility's invasive species removal project. This program allows students to learn about, and remove, plants that threaten the biodiversity of East Texas forests. She also developed a program to teach children how to create a school yard habitat, where students learn about birds in Texas, and they get to construct birdhouses to take back to their schools.

Going the extra mile, Ashley leads the OEC's sustainability committee, inspires the cafeteria staff to implement zero waste initiatives for limiting food waste, and organizes the center's recycling program. The community where the center is located does not have recycling services; so, she personally hauls the center's recyclables to a recycling facility in a nearby city.

During the 2011 drought, the OEC lost 30 percent of the trees on its property. This loss motivated Ashley to start a seedling planting program, where students plant trees and help rebuild the East

Texas piney woods. Ashley also devotes her private time to further these efforts, volunteering with outside organizations—including the Big Thicket National Preserve.

With her strong teaching skills, knowledge about the natural environment, and passion for conservation, Ashley ensures that students engage in a valuable hands-on experience. She wants them to leave the OEC with an appreciation for the natural environment.

Ashley's peers say she is an inspiration. Her dedication and hard-work makes them appreciate her every day.