

Reimagining Water Access in Little Rock, Arkansas



Photo credits: Central Arkansas Water

Central Arkansas Team

Artists:

- **Hamid Ebrahimifar**
- **Tanya Hollifield**

Central Arkansas Water:

- **Kelsey Burnett**, Content Specialist
- **Tamika Edwards**, Special Advisor to the CEO on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
- **Jane Hurley**, Education and Outreach Specialist
- **Doug Shackelford**, Director of Public Affairs and Communication

Background

Central Arkansas Water (CAW) serves the city of Little Rock and the surrounding area. Its source water is drawn from the nearby Lake Maumelle Watershed, which the utility has taken steps to preserve and protect over the last decade. This includes charging ratepayers a Watershed Protection Fee to enable the purchase of additional land for conservation around the lake, as well as to conduct environmental and water quality monitoring.¹ CAW educates the public about critical links between forest health and surface drinking water quality and the importance of downstream conservation. Its community education program includes running a biannual Citizens Water Academy for adults, water-themed educational festivals for elementary school students, and professional development trainings for teachers throughout the state. CAW also participates in the community in other ways, partnering with groups like Keep Little Rock Beautiful, The Big Catch Fishing Derby and Health Festival, and the popular Downtown Food Truck Festival.

The utility saw the Accelerator as an opportunity to further expand community connections and deepen relationships, especially in areas that existing programming did not reach. New to working with artists, the utility was not sure what to expect from the partnership. Nevertheless, staff were excited about the possibility of activating the area around its headquarters in downtown Little Rock.

Artist Recruitment and Selection

To select an artist, the utility pulled together an advisory committee with members from the Downtown Little Rock Partnership, the economic and urban development entity focused on improving the downtown area. This group came up with the idea for commissioning a mosaic mural that would depict the watershed and the history of water management in the area. The utility reached out to the Arkansas Museum for Fine Arts, which helped them identify two artists to work with: Tanya Hollifield and Hamid Ebrahimifar. The artists had worked together in the past, and both had collaborated with community members in mural making. They also were both deeply engaged with social justice issues in the community. Hamid participated in the initial phases of the project, but Tanya took over as the primary artist due to his capacity constraints.

Approach: Crate-Digging

As Tanya began the work of getting to know the utility and meeting with community groups, she realized that on its own, simply creating a beautiful mural would not fulfill the team's goal to utilize art to address a critical water issue for an underserved community. Tanya began to dig more deeply through historical research and personal conversations. Looking to the past can help ground one's understanding of water issues and offer better solutions moving forward. Benny Starr, the US Water Alliance's inaugural One Water Artist-in-Residence, likens this to "the art of crate-digging," a process he uses when creating hip-hop music. In the water sector, Benny finds that "crate-digging can deepen our understanding and contextualize our position in our work. Often, we cannot move forward without carefully and critically examining our history. This helps us be creative as we build on and innovate our way through purposeful and powerful work."

Tanya's crate-digging uncovered a few critical water issues. First was the Pegasus Pipeline, which has been out of operation since a spill in 2013 leaked tens of thousands of gallons of crude oil less than 10 miles from Lake Maumelle, the primary water source for 450,000 residents in Central Arkansas.² The pipeline's new owners, Energy Transfer Partners, are exploring putting it back online, something that the utility believes is a big risk to the watershed and the half a million Arkansans who rely on it for water. Community groups also informed Tanya about chronic issues with water leaks in the downtown area due to aging pipes and severe winter storms. Finally, Tanya came to learn that many of Little Rock's most vulnerable communities lack access to clean and affordable water. Near the CAW headquarters, this is especially apparent for unhoused people and people who have had their water shut off due to an inability to pay their bills. The utility is prohibited by state law from turning people's water back on until they have received full payment, limiting its ability to address the situation through debt forgiveness.

Tanya discussed her discoveries with CAW staff. After considering the range of possibilities, the team settled on equitable access to drinking water as the focus of the project. They then began discussing ways to address this issue and involve communities around the mural site in possible solutions.

Artist Spotlight: Tanya Hollifield



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How do we create community through art?
The key word is we. Art with the people, for the people belongs to all.

Artistic Practice(s):

Tanya is an artist working with drawing, painting, mixed media, and public art murals. She studied at the Arkansas Art Center, Arts Student League of New York City, and University of Arkansas.

Portfolio: <https://www.arkansasartscene.com/home/interview-with-artist-tanya-hollifield>

Instagram: [@TanyaHollifield](https://www.instagram.com/TanyaHollifield)

Pilot Project: Water Access on a Forest to Faucet Mural

Wanting the art to not only depict the issue but be part of the solution, Tanya proposed embedding a water bottle filling station within the mural. The utility was thrilled about this idea and began working on the engineering side to implement the vision. The immediate neighborhood around CAW headquarters has a high population of unhoused people and is located near a bus stop. People often wait for buses for hours, making it a perfect place to reach many who most need access to free water. In Tanya's words, "the idea of clean, safe water available 24/7 in a highly trafficked area is exciting. We are turning art into something for health, safety, and community well-being."

At this point in the project, it became clear that designing and installing a mosaic would be very time-consuming and require expensive materials, leaving the artists insufficient time and resources for community engagement. The team made the collective decision to pivot towards a painted mural. This freed up the artists' time, which could then be spent working with the utility on community outreach and engagement activities.

Over 70 people from various age groups and backgrounds participated in the process of creating the mural over the course of two months. Community members used stencils and paintbrushes to depict the water images that most resonated with them. As they worked, Tanya distributed reclaimed and sanitized water bottles to people passing by. The finished mural, called Forest to Faucet, depicts how water flows from its origins in the forest through the pipes for multiple community uses. It includes a portrait of beloved Little Rock environmental and social justice activist Derek Brooks and a participatory chalkboard where the community can write messages and answer prompts about water.

Over 200 people attended the mural unveiling event, including local business leaders, engineers, artists, parents of the student artists, and immediate area residents. The unveiling was held as part of the utility's participation in Imagine a Day Without Water in October 2022 to help raise public awareness about the importance of water and investment in water systems (<https://imagineadaywithoutwater.org/>). CAW hosted an afterparty at a neighborhood restaurant, where "groups of people who did not know each other were breaking bread together," according to Director of Public Affairs and Communications, Doug Shackelford.

Residents in Little Rock helped create the Forest to Faucet mural.
Photo credit: Central Arkansas Water



The mural allows residents and groups to interact with water topics.
Photo credit: Central Arkansas Water



Prior to the unveiling, the team engaged students in four Little Rock elementary schools to create their own artwork about water. The finished pieces were exhibited inside the utility building for the mural unveiling ceremony. Student artwork was then moved to the Central Arkansas Library Gallery for longer-term display and to reach a broader audience.

CAW staff also worked with Garver, a local engineering firm, to procure reusable water bottles with the Forest to Faucet logo, which it distributed to attendees at the mural unveiling. Afterward, Tanya, CAW, and Garver staff packed hundreds of bottles with small necessities like socks and snacks for unhoused residents in the area.

CAW plans to keep activating the mural site with public events and sidewalk takeovers. Tanya will use her remaining time and project budget for additional community engagement using the chalkboard. She is already planning an educational workshop on water issues in a bathroom at a local park using the stencils made for the mural.

Lessons Learned

Stay focused on the purpose and flexible on the “how.”

The Arkansas team initially spent a lot of time trying to figure out how to implement the mosaic mural idea, which was an exciting idea for the team, but did not ultimately fit within the project budget or priorities. Once the team let go of that concept, the project took off. Jane Hurley, Education and Outreach Specialist for the utility, says, “I didn’t realize how bogged down we were getting with the mosaic idea—and it was an expensive one. Once we realized directing the project’s energy toward public impact was a top priority, we refocused on engagement. Now, we are pulling in partners and learning more about community needs. It is exciting—we are thinking in new ways about how to provide continuity of water services.”

The utility’s openness and leadership support from CEO Tad Bohannon allowed the team flexibility to trust this process and embrace changes along the way. The team kept Tad informed throughout the project but let him know the project would differ from normal utility processes, which are “very spreadsheet driven.” Doug noted that they, “had to look at things through a different lens. Our company values are ‘high performance, values-driven innovation.’ Instead of an engineering problem, we had to apply those values to our work with artists and the community, and that meant taking a different route.”

A powerful idea can lead to powerful partnerships.

Initially, Tanya felt overwhelmed; engaging the community was a daunting task for a single artist. But once the team coalesced around the issue of water access and the inspiring idea of the water faucet, they were able to bring in a diverse array of partners: the Little Rock School District, Garver Engineering, the Arkansas Regional Innovation Hub (who produced stencils for the mural), other artists, and passersby in the area. Each of these groups brought their own stakeholders to the project, expanding the circle of outreach. The number and diversity of people at the launch event testified to the extent of community buy-in and excitement about the engagement. The bottle filler was an innovative feature of the mural that attracted extensive media coverage, including a full-color article above the fold in the state’s largest newspaper, mentions in the local morning shows and on National Public Radio, and coverage by CBS and MSN. Additionally, Tanya was interviewed by the state’s arts magazine, reaching another distinct audience. “We got more than our money’s worth in earned media,” Doug notes.

Clean tap water flowing from the mural. *Photo credit: Central Arkansas Water*



Art is a catalyst for ongoing progress.

Prior to the mural installation, the building and surrounding parking lot were vacant and unused. Now, people pass by and stop to look at the mural every day, offering utility staff the opportunity to regularly engage with the public. Doug says the utility is “ecstatic” and that they “now see opportunities to use creative processes and artistic interventions to engage the community everywhere. This project opened the door. The CEO was at the launch and now understands art as an integral part of CAW and our educational program going forward.” Kelsey Burnett, CAW’s Content Specialist, agrees on the long-term internal value of the utility’s engagement with arts and culture. “This project expanded how we think and work internally around public engagement and communications,” she says. The utility and Tanya are already talking about possible installations of other public faucets around the city. Tanya believes “these should be the norm, ideally with artwork around them.”



Tanya engaged with several school groups in water conversations at the mural. *Photo credit: Central Arkansas Water*

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Kelsey Burnett, Content Specialist, Central Arkansas Water

Challenges and Tensions

Fitting utility capacity and work style comfortably within artistic processes.

The project heavily relied on one utility team member as the primary liaison with the artist. When that team member got pulled into other obligations, it was sometimes difficult for the project to remain on schedule. The design and planning depended on timely approvals and responses, but this sometimes was not possible for the utility. Jane acknowledges, “I often didn’t appreciate what the artists needed from us. I didn’t understand the importance of what they were asking for.” She also says some of this has to do with utility operations often requiring more deliberation and bureaucracy than artists may be used to. She says, “utilities don’t do anything quickly.” For example, it took a significant amount of back and forth to determine whether the utility would be able to put in additional resources if the project undertook the installation of the mosaic mural. This lengthy process delayed the artists from being able to move forward with the design and planning.

Clarifying team expectations and roles.

The Accelerator prioritized relationship building and co-creation rather than the utility hiring an artist to execute a predetermined scope of work. One consequence of this was that it took some time for the artists and utilities to understand what the expectations were of them and what their role would be. Tanya and Hamid were looking for clear direction from the utility, who, not having worked with artists before, was looking for guidance from them. There was also a lack of clarity about which party would be responsible for which parts of the work, making it difficult for the artists to complete the budget and project plan. After a few months, at the recommendation of the Alliance, the artists created a contract that specified roles and project responsibilities for each party to sign (the Accelerator contract was between the artist and the Alliance and did not specify activities). This additional contract enabled the team to create a detailed budget and move forward with project planning. It is a lesson that while flexibility leaves room for creativity, team roles, expectations, and communications protocols need to be discussed and agreed upon early on.

Varying capacity among artists and utilities for community engagement.

Community engagement through arts partnerships is not an end-all. Tanya had been a long-time community activist and had worked on public murals prior to this installation. However, she did not have deep experience facilitating community engagement processes. She acknowledged early on that this was a learning curve for her. “Even though I’ve been an activist for a long time, I’ve learned how hard it is to engage with community groups when the project isn’t fully defined or feels abstract. We were working to provide a platform to include people, to pull people in by getting them excited about the project,” she says. Tanya was deeply

committed—she frequently reached out to the Alliance team and other Accelerator artists for advice and support. However, her experience, as well as the experience of other teams, is a reminder that community engagement is a skill and practice that takes time to develop and carry out. Engagement is also not the sole responsibility of one partner. Providing support in the form of coaching or providing artists with resources to hire other partners who have this skill set may be necessary when projects require this competency. In addition, as the partner that will have a sustained relationship with the community, it is critical that utility staff members directly participate in community engagement as well.

Read the full compendium here: <http://uswateralliance.org/initiatives/water-arts-and-culture-accelerator>.

The Forest to Faucet mural featuring Derek Brooks, local environmental and social justice advocate. *Photo credit: Central Arkansas Water*



Notes

- 1 Earth Economics and US Endowment for Forestry and Communities, *Communicating and Investing in Natural Capital using Water Rates* (Earth Economics, 2012), https://www.circleofblue.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/EE_US_Endowment_Watershed_Rates_2012.pdf.
- 2 Parris Kane, "Testing underway to get pipeline back online 8 years after mayflower oil spill," KATV ABC 7: Little Rock, October 11, 2021, <https://katv.com/news/local/testing-underway-8-years-after-mayflower-oil-spill-to-get-pipeline-back-online>.



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