

FWEA Students & Young Professionals 2024 Winter Newsletter

Message from the Chair

With great pleasure I present the FWEA Students and Young Professionals Committee (SYPC) Winter Newsletter, highlighting the best of the Fall and Winter 2024 events and welcoming the new season. With this new issue, we'd first like to thank our sponsors for supporting our many initiatives and we're delighted to note our new sponsorship drive is still open. Thanks to you all, our ideas become a reality, helping us educate and inspire the future generation of our industry!

This Newsletter aims to provide insights from recent YP involvements in a variety of member engagement activities across the state and nation, through a collection of articles from our most active committee members. We gathered the 2024 Student Design Competition (SDC) Winning Teams' success stories at the Water Environment Federation's Technical Exhibition and Conference (WEFTEC). Followed by a spotlight on our Floridian WEF InFLOW Scholars. In addition, our very own SYPC Vice Chair - Olga Mikhilchishina - graciously served as the 2024 Service Project Chair and shared the experience with us. Lastly, we had a fellow YP attend the House of Delegates and offer their perspective on the experience.

As we step into this Spring season, our team will be busy preparing for the Florida Water Resources Conference (FWRC), taking place at the West Palm Beach Convention Center on May 4th-7th, 2025. We look forward to seeing you there. If you or someone you know is interested in joining the SYPC or wants to become an FWRC volunteer, please reach out to myself or any one of our program Directors to get connected.

Jissell Muir, EI

Arcadis

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FWEA SYPC Leadership Organizational Charts



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Olga Mikhachishina	(Woodard & Curran)
Jissell Muir	(Arcadis)
Emma Johnson	(Hazen and Sawyer)
Gabby Squillante	(Carollo Engineers)
Alyssa Massais	(CDM Smith)
Zachary Loeb	(Clay County Utilities)
Alex Maas	(Heyward)
Senuda Rajapakse	(Xylem Water Solutions)
William Mohrman	(Jones Edmund)
Michael Meeks	(CDM Smith)
John Cwikowski	(Bowman)
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Kaylei Kambak	(Tetra Tech)
Kylee Kavanagh	(Hazen and Sawyer)
Deanna Delgado	(Kimley-Horn)
Kimberly Lawrence	(Arcadis)
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Samar Al Mashrafi	(Arcadis)
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S&YPs Engagement: Central Florida Chapter Student Liaison Recap – Fall 2024

"The FWEA Central Florida Chapter (CFC) is marking the end to yet another successful semester of student-led initiatives! FWEA CFC partnered with students from the University of Central Florida's Society of Environmental Engineers (SEE) and American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) student chapters to organize water and wastewater treatment plant tours, a General Body Meeting (GBM) presentation, football tailgate, as well as a beach cleanup in conjunction with FSAWWA and ASCE Space Coast.

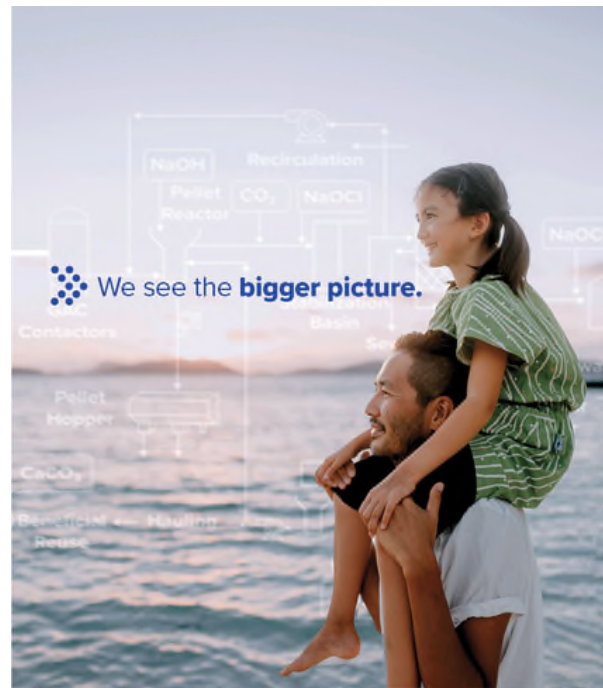
The semester kicked off with a UCF SEE meet-and-greet early in the semester which not only highlighted upcoming CFC events, but also the benefit of getting involved - and staying involved - in professional organizations. Students were educated on the organizational structure of FWEA, the FWEA Internship and Mentorship programs, as well as the Florida Water Resources Conference (FWRC). Students were also encouraged to take advantage of the numerous free FWEA student memberships available and to participate in FWEA committee and chapter activities. This semester kickoff meeting transitioned perfectly to CFC's first football tailgating event. Despite periodic rainfall, students showed up in numbers and enjoyed catered lunch, fun games, and great conversation with a handful of professionals in the industry.



During early planning efforts with the student chapter leadership, it was revealed that students were most interested in plant tours this semester. CFC leadership coordinated with contacts at Orange County Utilities (OCU) and the UCF Utilities & Engineering Services to schedule tours to visit OCU's South Water Reclamation Facility (SWRF) and UCF's water and power infrastructure. OCU's SWRF was identified as a facility of particular interest due to its large capacity and close proximity to Universal's EPIC® Universe theme park. Although UCF does not have any on-site wastewater treatment, students were granted a behind-the-scenes walking tour of the distribution and power generation facilities that exist on-campus. Between these two tours, students gained valuable insight regarding how the engineering and process theory taught in classrooms gets applied in the real-world.



The pinnacle event of the semester was the annual FWEA Beach Cleanup held on the Space Coast in early November 2024. Leading up to this event, the FWEA community received tragic news that one of our own volunteers, Amber Balester, passed away unexpectedly. Amber worked with GOVAPEXTM in Cocoa, FL and was an up-and-coming FWEA rockstar having graciously taken on volunteering roles within both FWEA CFC and the Students and Young Professionals Committee (SYPC). Because Amber was excited to co-organize this year's beach cleanup, the decision was made to dedicate this year's event in her honor. To that end, volunteers from FWEA CFC, FSAWWA Region III, ASCE Space Coast, and GOVAPEXTM banded together to make this year's event particularly special. The result was a beautiful day spent with friends and family to share laughs, tidy up a local beach, and enjoy another excellent barbecued lunch by the GOVAPEXTM group. FWEA looks forward to dedicating this event in Amber's honor for years to come. In all, this marked another successful semester of student-led events from the Central FL region. The CFC hopes that continued coordination with students will foster the next generation of FWEA volunteers and water professionals. In CFC's experience, the future of Florida's water industry is looking very bright! We would like to encourage volunteers from other chapters to leverage the lessons learned by the CFC during the planning stage and to take advantage of the informational and financial support available through the SYPC. Funds are available via SYPC on a first-come, first-served basis to sponsor student outreach efforts (e.g., food and drink purchases for GBM visits, etc.)"



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Angel Villarruel-Moore, MS EnvE

Carollo Engineers,
Staff Professional

Angel is the current Central Florida Chapter (CFC) Student liaison and SYPC Treasurer. To contact him, please email avmoore@carollo.com.





2024 WEFTEC Highlights

The University of Florida (UF) and University of South Florida (USF) teams won the 2024 FWRC SDC Environmental and Wastewater Categories, respectively, granting them the opportunity to present their designs in the fall at WEFTEC. The UF team continued its winning momentum, bringing home a first-place title in the national Environmental Design category (this is the first time a Florida team has placed first at the WEFTEC SDC since 2014)!



"It was great to see the culmination of our months of hard work finally pay off. We loved the opportunity to see what other teams came up with, and their different takes on water/wastewater design! We got to reconnect with the USF team, who we haven't seen since they won the wastewater division at FWEA's SDC. We liked seeing what everyone has been up to since FWRC and found out some of their team members even work in the same buildings as us back in Tampa! As for the actual SDC, it was a long day but filled with lots of learning and meeting great people. We're really proud of the work we did as a team and winning was certainly a fun surprise. Most of us had never attended a professional conference before, and WEFTEC was definitely a great one to be at! We attended some technical sessions, YP events, and explored the exhibit hall (which was HUUUGE). We'd highly recommend the SDC experience to anyone looking to get involved with FWEA/WEF! Go Gators!"

The UF Aqua Machina Team





Building Connections and Confidence

“Attending WEFTEC 2024 as an InFLOW Scholar was an incredible opportunity that deepened my understanding of the water industry and professional networking. Thanks to Dr. James Mihelcic at USF, I attended alongside my peer, Adriana Mayr Mejia, and gained first hand exposure to industry leaders and cutting-edge discussions.



Adriana (left), Isabella (right)

As my first-ever conference, WEFTEC felt daunting, but the InFLOW program’s structured preparation gave me the confidence to navigate it. The experience was both educational and welcoming — professionals were eager to share insights, and the industry’s strong sense of community stood out. Luke Thompson from the Water Leadership Institute provided invaluable mentorship, offering career advice and encouragement.

Beyond professional growth, I built lifelong friendships with fellow InFLOW Scholars. We still stay connected through a group chat, supporting each other with career updates and opportunities. I highly encourage students and young professionals to explore InFLOW—it’s more than just a conference; it’s a gateway to a strong and supportive network.”

Isabella Guzaldo

2024 InFLOW Scholar

guzaldoi@usf.edu





"I also attended affinity events like the Hispanics in Water Luncheon and the Student and Young Professional (SYP) Meeting, where I connected with others who shared similar backgrounds and experiences. Walking the showroom left me in awe—curious and hopeful to learn more about emerging technologies in the water sector. Speaking with companies at the SYP Career Fair reinforced just how exciting it is to be part of this industry. Through these experiences, I gained clarity on the path I want to pursue—wastewater treatment and beneficial reuse.

Thanks to InFLOW, I'm stepping into this next chapter with a deeper understanding of the field and a strong network of mentors and peers. As I prepare to graduate, I feel energized by the possibilities ahead and eager to contribute to the future of water.

I grew up biking and hiking in the mountains of Honduras, where rainfall would nourish our creeks and vegetation. The environment was an integral part of my upbringing, but as a child, I struggled to understand why, despite all the rain, water issues persisted in the city. Studying environmental engineering at USF helped me connect the dots—poor water management and aging infrastructure can deeply affect communities. My curiosity led me to research stormwater pond quality, where I first became interested in water reuse. Encouraged by my advisor, I applied to the InFLOW STEmpath program, an initiative designed to introduce students from diverse backgrounds to careers in the water sector. Last October, I had the incredible opportunity to attend WEFTEC as part of this cohort.

Looking back, attending WEFTEC as an InFLOW scholar gave me a strong foundation for building a career in water. From touring a wastewater treatment plant to meeting current and future leaders at the Water Leadership Institute celebration, every experience held immense value. The program also paired me with an amazing mentor, Ramya Sankar, who has guided me through career exploration and professional growth. I had the chance to speak with professionals at all stages of their careers, gaining insights into their paths and aspirations."

**Adriana
Mayr Mejia**

2024 InFLOW Scholar
adrianamayrmejia@usf.edu



We are excited to announce that as of January 2025, FWEA SYPC started a local InFLOW program. We invite community college and vocational students to apply to our new scholarship opportunity to attend FWRC, for an in-person introduction to the water industry. Additionally, we plan to offer a similar scholarship for Young Professional Utility Workers. Please visit our [website](#), to learn more.



Making an Impact: 2024 WEFTEC Service Project

"This year, I had the distinct privilege of chairing the WEFTEC Service Project, an experience that was both profoundly challenging and deeply rewarding. Supported by a dedicated team and local partners, we brought to life a project that not only improved infrastructure but also made a lasting impact on a cherished community institution.



The project was hosted at St. Mary's Academy in New Orleans, a private Catholic college preparatory school renowned for its rich history and commitment to education. St. Mary's includes a co-educational elementary division and an all-girls middle and high school, operated by the Sisters of the Holy Family, the country's oldest congregation of African American nuns.

The focus of this year's project was to enhance drainage around the cafeteria entrance at St. Mary's Academy. This improvement was critical to ensuring the safety of students and staff by mitigating flood risks and creating a more resilient campus environment.

Our community partners played an essential role, bringing their expertise and enthusiasm to every stage of the project.

Their collaboration not only made this project possible but also underscored the power of teamwork in addressing environmental challenges. One of the hallmarks of the WEFTEC Service Project is its inclusive nature. Registration is free and open to all WEFTEC attendees and their guests, making it an excellent opportunity for participants to engage with the host city.

Behind the scenes, committee volunteers are the driving force. They design the project, coordinate marketing efforts, and secure funds and materials, ensuring its success. This collective effort exemplifies the spirit of WEFTEC—bringing professionals together not just for learning and networking but also for meaningful community impact.

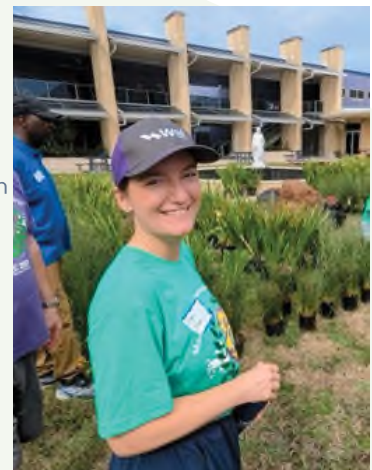
Chairing the WEFTEC Service Project was an unforgettable journey. The dedication of everyone involved—from volunteers to local partners—made it a truly collaborative effort. Seeing the completed project at St. Mary's Academy and knowing the difference it will make for the students and staff was incredibly rewarding.

This project is a reminder of the power of community and the importance of environmental stewardship. It was an honor to contribute to this meaningful tradition and to help create a safer, more sustainable space for St. Mary's Academy."

**Olga
Mikhalchishina**

Ardurra Group

omikhalchishina@ardurra.com






House of Delegates

"My trip to WEFTEC was one with a spirit of inquiry and amazement. This was my first WEFTEC, and my participation at the conference started Saturday morning when the House of Delegates kicked off their Networking and Icebreaker Activity. At this activity groups of delegates had to figure out what everyone had in common and then present it in front of the entire House. It was amazing to observe how such a diverse group of individuals separated by large distances all had so much in common, especially their passion to help create a world where each person has access to clean water. After getting to know one another the main delegate meeting started, the Speaker, Speaker Elect, and heads of each committee presented the work that they have been doing for WEF and what the next steps are to help the strategic plans become a reality.




Seeing these efforts and ambitions in action really puts into perspective how our contributions and participation at the local chapters benefits the organization. Later, we all worked together in work group sessions to highlight challenges and topics facing the industry and approaches WEF can take to address them. I was impressed at just how many Young professional delegates there was at the event. Everyone was so friendly and excited to be there, I didn't know how many young people from across the world were all working to further the WEF's mission.



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I continued to participate in the conference through the end of Monday, in Committee meetings, jumping into a technical session when I had time between the meetings and of course to trek the spectacular exhibit hall. At the exhibit hall was one of was an amazing career fair for Young Professionals. It was exciting to see so many students from the Student Design Competition attending and networking with different sectors of the industry. Later, at the Government Affairs committee meeting, we met with Zach Schafer the Director of Policy and Special Projects Office of Water US EPA and discussed PFAS, regulatory challenges and changes in the water industry. Learning about upcoming policies that impact us across every sector.

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One of my favorite events was the Student & YP community meeting where there was a packed room full of students and young professionals. Here the WEF YP committee was able to share all the different amazing opportunities that are available through WEF, encouraging these rising water professionals to get involved at their local chapters. One that I was able to share was the Water Policy Fly in event that takes place in D.C. I was able to participate this last year and had an amazing unforgettable experience that brought me many new friends. A huge shoutout and thank you to Olga Mikhachishina and Ama Richardson for making the event unforgettable. I was humbled and completely surprised to find out at this meeting that I was chosen to be honored as the YP Rookie of the year. Truly an amazing group of people and heartwarming memories that will last a lifetime. But wait, there's one more event... The YP Social. The social was a total blast. A room full of rising water starts singing karaoke and dancing along is something that you treasure for years to come. This was an unforgettable adventure, and it is a true blessing that I can share with you all."

Zachary Loeb

Clay County Utility Authority

zloeb@clayutility.org





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Upcoming Events

First Coast Chapter

April 08

2025 FSAWWA Region I and FWEA First Coast
Chapter Spring Luncheon
11:00 AM – 01:30 PM

Manasota Chapter

April 23

FWEA Manasota x FSAWWA Region X Joint
Luncheon
11:30 AM – 01:00 PM

Southwest Chapter

April 17

Southwest Chapter Fort Myers South AWWTF
Tour
05:30 PM – 07:30 PM

Southeast Chapter

April 17

FWEA Southeast Chapter – Member
Appreciation Event
06:00 PM – 08:00 PM

West Coast Chapter

April 03

FWEA WCC City of Dunedin WWTP Plant Tour
03:00 PM – 05:00 PM

April 24

EWB-FL and FWEA West Coast Chapter Present:
Helping with Hops
06:00 PM – 08:00 PM

April 24

EWB-FL and FWEA West Coast Chapter Present:
Helping with Hops
06:00 PM – 08:00 PM

Conference

May 04-07

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Additional Events listed at:

[FWEA Calendar of Events](#)

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2024-2025 FWEA Internship Program



The purpose of this program is to help educate, inform, and guide talented individuals to internships with reputable organizations within the Florida water industry.

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"I found my internship working for the R&R team at Orange County Utilities through the **FWEA Internship Program**. Interning at OCU's Engineering Department has been a valuable experience; I've been able to learn industry tools such as GIS and AutoCAD. I've been able to work on projects that help the county, learn how projects progress from planning to construction, all while focusing on my interest in the water-related field."

Genevieve Frangoulis
University of Central Florida



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Silver Level (\$400):

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- One **YP Workshop ticket** (at FWRC)

GOLD LEVEL (\$800):

- Company logo on **SYPC website** and on **Sponsorship Board** at the FWRC Student Design Competition
- Receive **resumes** from students actively involve in SYPC initiatives.
- **Quarter page ad** in SYPC newsletters (semiannual)
- Two **YP Workshop tickets** (at FWRC)
- Company **job portal** included on the FWEA Internship Program website



Your Donation Supports the Following Events

- **Student Design Competition**
 - Each First Place team receives a Norm Casey Scholarship from FWEA plus travel allowance to attend WEFTEC 2025.
- **SYPC Poster Competition**
 - First and Second Place winners receive monetary prizes.
- **YP of the Year Award**
 - Recipient receives travel allowance to attend National YP Summit.
- **Student Outreach/Activities**

Funds are allocated each year to support various student activities.

Students & Young Professionals Committee

2025 Sponsorship Form

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Please include your **Company Logo** and either **Quarter Page Ad** (Gold Sponsors) or **Business Card** (Silver Sponsors) along with this Sponsorship Registration Form.

Contact **Angel Villarruel-Moore** (avmoore@carollo.com) if you have any questions.

A Collection of Tributes to Amber Balester

I write this with immense sadness over the unimaginable and sudden loss of my dear friend, Amber. She was only 34, vibrant, full of life, and a remarkable person whose spirit could brighten even the darkest of days. I still vividly remember the first time I met her. It was only three years ago, and even though we exchanged just a few short words, I knew right away she was someone special. In my career, I've met thousands of people, but she was unlike anyone else. There was an immediate connection like we had known each other our entire lives. It was that instant, that bond, that would grow into one of the most cherished friendships of my life.

Her open heart and genuine spirit made it easy for our friendship to blossom. Our weekly Taco Tuesdays and Thursday lunch outings became routine, simple yet cherished moments. We had our favorite spots, but we were always open to trying new ones, eager to make memories and share stories. Over time, I got to know her outside of work, she introduced me to her family, and I introduced mine to hers. We both shared a love for all things Disney, and soon, our families were creating special traditions. Visiting the gingerbread houses at Christmas, colorful Easter egg displays at Disney Resorts, and theme park visits, became some of the best memories we shared together.

She was particularly passionate about Disney World, and her love for Stitch was something truly special. Her world revolved around that lovable blue alien, and it was a joy to see her light up whenever she talked about him. But more than just Disney, Amber's heart was filled with love for her family. Every evening, she would gather with her grandmother and loved ones for dinner. She made family time a priority, whether it was planning a trip to Disney or organizing a getaway to Tennessee. She had a way of making everyone feel included, no one was ever left out of her plans or her heart.

Professionally, she approached her work with diligence, compassion and determination. She was always willing to tackle any task, big or small, and if she didn't know how to solve a problem, she would find the answer. Her dedication allowed her to rise quickly within our organization, taking on numerous responsibilities. We all came to rely on her. She also found joy in joining outside organizations, where she was welcomed with open arms, quickly earning the respect of professionals beyond our company. She once told me she never could have imagined how much she would grow in her career, and it's true. She had only just begun to show the world what she was capable of. I have no doubt she would have continued to inspire and lead for many years to come.

Amber, I am so proud and honored to have been a part of your life, even if for such a short time. I will forever cherish the memories we made together, the lunches, the laughter, and of course, your magnetic smile. Your heart was full of light, and your spirit will never be forgotten. I believe her outlook on life can best be summed up by a quote from Walt Disney: "No matter how your heart is grieving, if you keep on believing, the dream that you wish will come true." I take comfort in knowing that your dreams, Amber, are now a part of the stars, shining brightly for all of us to see. I'll see you again, my friend. Until then, you will always have a place in my heart.

*With love,
Rick Dias*

Amber was such a remarkable person. I still remember my first week in the office when she shared that her dad had just returned from a fishing trip in the Bahamas. To my surprise, she brought me some of the fresh catch to take back home to Kansas! We tucked the fish into the freezer that morning and as the day went on, we hadn't thought through how to keep it cool for the journey home. Our plan was to buy dry ice - only to discover that flying with dry ice was prohibited! Amber improvised and crafted homemade ice packs to wrap around the fish and even lent me her own cooler to transport it safely home. I feel incredibly grateful to have known her. Her spirit and kindness will always be remembered.

Brady Oglesby

When Amber first joined our company, she may not have had the required skills, experience, or formal education, but what she brought was an incredible attitude, boundless enthusiasm, and a determination to learn and succeed. She thrived on challenges and never backed down from mastering any task set before her. Her genuine smile and positive energy were infectious, making a lasting impact on everyone around her. In just three years, this remarkable individual, initially hired as an administrative assistant, became a valued member of my leadership team. Amber's contributions will be deeply missed by me and all who had the pleasure of working with her.

Robert Jeyaseelan

I've only been working for the company for a few months, I didn't know Amber for very long. When I first met her, I knew right away the person she was; cheerful, authentic, and very kind. Her happy spirit brightened the most challenging of days. She was never too busy to stop what she was doing to help me with whatever silly questions I had. She left an indelible mark on me, and I will always remember her kindness. The office is a lot dimmer now that she is gone, but I know she is smiling down at us.

Kelly Carpenter

I have many fond memories of conversations with Amber. One particularly fun time was when we traveled to Chicago this past summer for a training conference. (Picture was submitted) The event was fine and informative, but the time Amber and I spent together was really special. We both share an appreciation for travel and good food. We walked all over the city of Chicago taking in the beautiful architecture and parks. Every evening we carefully chose a restaurant to enjoy great Chicago cuisine. What I enjoyed was watching Amber experience these sites taking numerous photos. I appreciated her zest for life. She always had a positive attitude, even when GPS got us lost in the middle of the city. We walked several blocks in the wrong direction before realizing we were lost. We both couldn't help but laugh that two grown, intelligent women got lost in the city. We ended up calling an Uber to take us to our destination. We said we would never tell anyone how "dumb" we both felt. I share it here because it will always be a great memory for me of that time together. Amber had an amazing work ethic. She was also fun, thoughtful and a good friend. I miss talking to her daily and her positive energy. I will always be grateful for the time I was blessed to have her in my life.

Stephanie Coppedge

Amber was not only an asset to our FWEA SYPC team, but also an amazing person with a kind heart and a bright mind, she will truly be missed. May she rest in peace and live on forever in our memories.

Jessell Muir

Amber was so quick to share, outgoing, kind, and knew how to make someone laugh. I will keep her and her family in my prayers and always treasure the time we got to spend together.

Zachary Lock

Amber was such a delightful and driven person, and she will be deeply missed.

Olga Mikhailchishina

Amber was such a nice person. I only met her once, but she was super easy to talk to and cared a lot about the stuff that we do.

Senuda Rajapakse



In Memory
Amber Balester





Dear Friend, thank you for sharing your light with us.
We will forever celebrate you!