It's been said that music and food are the primary languages spoken down here in New Orleans. To that point, I'd like to reflect on the most important words spoken to me about my career. They didn't come from a professor, business mentor, or high-powered motivational speaker. Instead, they came from a musician and have been the driving force for my involvement in A&WMA’s education initiatives ever since.

I met that musician—world-renowned trumpeter Kermit Ruffins—at a concert in New Orleans. I had just wrapped up my first semester at Louisiana State University (LSU), and after introducing myself to him, we started to talk about my major: environmental science. The ghost of Hurricane Katrina still hung over the city and we spoke candidly about our shared experiences of having to evacuate and watch our beloved hometown flood. He asked about my motivations for choosing my major and I replied that I never wanted to see a disaster of that scale impact New Orleans, or any city for that matter, again. He smiled, gestured to the scene of families bustling around us, and said “these kids need more scientists like you to change our culture” before hustling back on stage to finish his set.

I met Kermit again not long after graduating from LSU. Things had changed for the better in New Orleans: the city was in the midst of an economic renewal, the rebuilding effort...
from Katrina had made New Orleans one of the top cities in the country for young professionals, and most importantly, the Saints had finally won a Super Bowl. As I made my way to Kermit after the set I was sure he wouldn’t remember me. Much to my surprise, he did.

The first thing he asked me after our reintroduction was “did you change the world yet?” My answer was sheepish. I told him I hadn’t. I was being honest. Here was a musician who was one of Louisiana’s cultural treasures. The founder of the world’s most famous brass band and most likely the artist you are imagining when any song associated with New Orleans is played on the TV or radio. I felt embarrassed that I wasn’t able to make an impact yet. I was as green as they came in the environmental field and my career was just a college degree and a wisp of hope at that point. And then came those career-defining words: “This generation. These kids. They need you.”

Being a young professional is a lot like visiting Disney World for the first time. For the amount of planning and preparation you put into making your first day a smooth one, when the moment actually arrives chaos is inevitable. There are always unforeseen pitfalls, personality clashes, and the occasional case of motion sickness after riding Space Mountain. Maybe that last one isn’t experienced by those beginning a new job that often, but for the majority of young professionals there is a certain amount of anxiety when you stand on two feet in a personal and professional sense for the first time and can call something your own, whether it’s a car, family, house, or career.

In the midst of all of this madness young professionals are also told to find balance. For some of us Taco Tuesday is that balance, for others it is packing a bag and traveling the world. Personally, I found my balance in volunteer education, specifically in planning and delivering science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) lessons with the help of my local A&WMA Section to elementary school students in disadvantaged neighborhoods where the question of environmental justice isn’t a theoretical one.

The lessons were simple, but the impact is lasting. The school I volunteered at in the Gardere neighborhood of Baton Rouge planted a garden to learn about the water cycle and teach students proper sampling and lab safety procedures. The students took core samples and had the samples analyzed by soil scientists and A&WMA Student Chapter members at LSU, both of whom spoke to the entire community about the need for more grassroots efforts in neighborhoods like Gardere. It may take a village, but I was glad to help make that difference and finally be able to tell Kermit that I had changed part of the world.

Environmental education is one of the singular tenets of the A&WMA mission, and one of the things this Association does better than any other. The ability to provide a neutral forum for information and idea exchange between professionals is necessary in today’s world, where information moves so quickly that it may not always be current or precise. In the same vein, A&WMA’s Education Council and Young Professional Advisory Council (YPAC) seek to bring balanced and accurate environmental education resource guides (EERGs) to classrooms, ranging from Kindergarten to 12th Grade.

EERGs are intended to supplement current STEM curricula, as well as provide a window into the work environmental professionals perform through classroom exercises, experiments, and field visits. They also allow a chance for professionals to visit classrooms and make connections with local educators and students, which can spinoff into deeper, more meaningful conversations among community members on environmental issues.

While the impact of EERGs are contingent on their use by schools, it is a great tool for teachers and home educators, and we hope more A&WMA members become familiar with, and help design, these much-needed resources. If you are looking to plug into A&WMA and don’t know where to start, consider education! Getting involved is easier than you think, and the rewards are bigger than you can imagine. Truly a “Big Easy”. em

YP Perspective is a regular column organized by A&WMA’s Young Professional Advisory Council (YPAC). YPAC strives to effectively engage professionals within the Association by developing services and activities to meet the needs of today’s young professionals (YPs). A YP is defined by the Association as being 35 years of age or younger. Each YP is encouraged to get involved with the Association, whether within their local Chapter or Section or within the Association’s four Councils (Education Council, Technical Council, Sections and Chapters Council, and YPAC). YPs interested in getting involved may contact YPAC for more information on current volunteer and leadership opportunities. Call for Submissions: If you have a topic you would like to see YPs discuss, e-mail: Christopher Whitehead at cwhitehead@trinityconsultants.com.

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