

During this experience, I had to learn how to focus on what truly mattered in my research, especially when it came to asking meaningful questions and collecting data through interviews. At the event, I was immediately pushed into hands-on work, which challenged me to step out of my comfort zone but also gave me a valuable opportunity to gather my data directly from the people involved. Instead of relying on secondhand information or observations from a distance, I had the chance to talk to individuals face-to-face and listen to their personal experiences, concerns, and ideas. This approach helped me understand how important it is to be fully present in the moment when doing community-engaged research.

Most of my data came from conducting interviews. In those interviews, I asked questions that helped me uncover how people think about water conservation, why they value it, and how their backgrounds, identities, and communities shape their views. These questions were things like, "What influenced you to come out to this event today?", "What did you think you'll possibly gain from this event?", "What did you gain from this event? If you've gained anything, if someone were to come up to you and explain what you've done and the purpose for it, how would you describe it?", "What did you find most interesting about this event?", and lastly, "Would this be something you'd recommend to a friend?". Asking questions like these helped me gain a deeper understanding of how water connects to more than just the environment. It connects to identity, culture, memory, and community. Many people shared personal stories about their families, their neighborhoods, or traditions they grew up with, and those stories revealed how emotional and cultural water-related issues can be.

This experience also helped me understand the importance of designing youth-centered approaches to community work. Hearing people talk about their experiences made me realize how essential it is to create spaces where young people feel heard and respected. Young adults have their own experiences, insights, and leadership abilities, and when they are given the chance to speak and take initiative, they often bring creativity and energy that adults may overlook. Throughout the process, I reflected on how often spaces for community problem-solving are led mainly by adults, even when the issues affect younger generations the most. Recognizing this pushed me to think about how research and community programs can be structured differently, making room for youth voices, letting young people lead conversations, and valuing their lived experiences as valid forms of knowledge.

Overall, this project taught me how important it is to be intentional with the questions I ask and the ways I collect data. It helped me see that research is most powerful when it is rooted in real human experiences rather than just information gathered from afar. The hands-on work reminded me that meaningful research often requires stepping into the community, listening deeply, and allowing participants to shape the direction of the conversation. Most importantly, this experience emphasized the value of youth-centered engagement in discussions about water conservation and community wellness. By respecting young people's voices and giving them space to lead, we can design approaches that not only address environmental issues but also support identity, culture, and community empowerment.