

## GEC to host Latino Conservation Week events

By LAUREN MCDONALD [lmcdonald@thebrunswicknews.com](mailto:lmcdonald@thebrunswicknews.com)

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Ness Montoya discovered at a young age the importance of using her voice, especially in conversations about issues as critical as promoting sustainability and protecting the environment.

Montoya, who is of Columbian descent and who grew up in the city of Hialeah in Miami-Dade County, works today as an outreach assistant for the Glynn Environmental Coalition. Her role with the organization is focused on advocating for the Latinx-Hispanic community in Brunswick.

“I belong to the community ... and am passionate about speaking on all topics involving human rights and how we, as human beings, can help improve the quality of life of others,” she said.

Montoya also played a crucial role in helping GEC organize the inaugural Latino Conservation Week observation in the Golden Isles. Events throughout the week, which will kick off Saturday, are intended to engage local Hispanic and Latino residents in conversations about environmental issues and opportunities to experience this kind of work firsthand.

“I’m hoping with these events, people become aware that even though the community is small, it is prideful and proud to be Latino-x and bring our culture to the Glynn County area,” Montoya said. “I also hope that with this event, we can join together with the rest of the communities in Glynn County to bring awareness of what is going on in the environmental concerns we have here in Brunswick.”

GEC aims to increase its engagement with the local Latino and Hispanic communities, said Rachael Thompson, executive director.

“Our goal was to basically have a number of targeted outreach events specifically for the Latino and Hispanic communities,” she said.

The local nonprofit connected recently with the Hispanic Access Foundation, a national organization that has cultivated Latino Conservation Week efforts across the country.

“Their goal is to really elevate Latino voices, and it engaged Latinos with conservation efforts and really just solidified the role that Latinos play in environmental protection and advocacy,” Thompson said.

The first Latino Conservation Week in Brunswick, planned for July 17-25, will include three events.

GEC will partner Saturday with College of Coastal Georgia's Office of Diversity and Inclusion to host an eco-fair and panel discussion from 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. at the college's Southeast Georgia Conference Center.

Those interested in enrolling at the college or working in environmental fields are encouraged to attend the eco-fair, which will also include speakers and lunch.

"A number of environmental organizations will be represented by members of these organizations that identify themselves as either Latino or Hispanic," Thompson said. "... We want (attendees) to engage with professionals that are in the environmental field or working for sustainability of some sort, and they can have a conversation with them and they can ask questions about their career path."

Sea Salt Healthy Kitchen, a Latino-owned business on St. Simons, will also participate in the event and share their sustainability-focused business model.

The next event will take place July 20, when community members are invited to take a wildlife excursion on Jekyll Island. The trip will be free for participants and was organized in partnership with GEC, the Georgia Autobahn Society and Jekyll Island Authority.

The goal is to promote access to local natural resources that are not always easily accessible to low-income or minority communities.

"If you think about Jekyll Island, even though it's just a short drive down the road, there might be families in Brunswick that can't afford the parking fee, so there's a financial barrier for them being able to enjoy that natural resource," Thompson said. "Or maybe they don't have transportation, and they can't get over there and there's no public transportation."

This trip aims to break down some of those barriers by providing transportation, a tour across the island, as well as breakfast and lunch that day.

"We have a number of stops around the island to look at birds and other wildlife," Thompson said.

The final event will be a water quality monitoring workshop, hosted from 1-4 p.m. July 24 at CCGA's Student Activities Center.

"We host those workshops quarterly, but this one is specifically targeted at the Latino and Hispanic residents," Thompson said.

J. Checo Colón-Gaud, a professor of biology at Georgia Southern University, will lead the workshop and share his work focused on the ecology of freshwater ecosystems.

“All of the events are free,” Thompson said. “RSVPs are not required, though they are preferred so we can have a good head count and know how much food to get.”

To RSVP or learn more, please visit [glynnenvironmental.org](http://glynnenvironmental.org).

Montoya, who began working with GEC after learning about the organization during an environmental psychology class at CCGA, said the voices of the local Latino community matter greatly in conversations about environmental issues.

“To bring awareness of what’s going on in our environment in Spanish for the Latinx-Hispanic community matters to us at the GEC,” she said. “We want to get our Latinx-Hispanic community involved and engaged in what’s going on in their surroundings and to help guide their own voice to advocate for their families and loved ones.”

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Lauren McDonald