It’s Art About Water Treatment!

An interview with Mallory Chaput, the artist inspiring future water leaders-one artwork at a time

Swati Hegde, Ph.D.

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ABSTRACT
This article throws a spotlight on Mallory Chaput, an artist inspiring future water leaders to take up water careers. Through her coloring pages, paintings, and comics about the water treatment, Mallory is helping children re-imagine the water sector. Originally a landscaper, Mallory developed a profound interest in water and wastewater treatment and learned about it by visiting plants, talking to professionals, and studying engineering books. This article is a transcript of an interview with Mallory, featuring her background, her imaginative creations and her future goals.

1 INTRODUCTION

As the US economy continues to grow, there is still a struggle to translate this growth into more equitable and inclusive employment opportunities. The US water infrastructure has aged, calling for an urgent need for repair, maintenance and restoration. However, it is not just the infrastructure that is aging. A significant percentage of the skilled workforce capable of carrying out these operations is eligible for retirement leading to a “Silver Tsunami” in the water sector. The increasing number and complexity of water challenges brought on by climate change, global health issues, a global recession, aging infrastructure, etc. will require more innovation and bold leadership.

While the aging workforce is a challenge for the water industry, it also has created a new pipeline of opportunity for the younger generation. According to Brookings Report, the water sector workforce lacks gender and racial diversity with 85% of the workforce being male (nearly two-thirds white), pointing towards a need for younger, more diverse talent. On the brighter side, water related occupations tend to pay more than the national average compared to all occupations.

The water sector clearly represents a plethora of opportunities for the younger generation that wants to serve the economy, environment and society. However, the next generation of young professionals must view the water sector as an attractive, rewarding and meaningful career option.

There is a more pressing need for inspiring young minds to take up jobs in the water sector now than ever through mentoring, guidance and encouragement. One mode of inspiring young minds that is increasingly becoming successful is through art. Artists can bridge the gap between academia and the water sector by connecting emotion to the urgency and relevance of working for the water sector. Art can transmit a sense of personal responsibility, change the thinking process and ultimately affect decision making.¹ Art can be used as effective mode of communication and education for the younger generation.

¹ https://www.earthday.org/art-and-science/
Fortunately, arts and science are no longer strange bedfellows. Many artists sensitive to the changes in the natural world such as climate change have become some of the strongest voices in inspiring younger generation to fight for climate change, protect biodiversity, fight for equity and the more recently emerged artist Mallory Chaput, who is making art about the water treatment.

In doing so, Mallory is creating a variety of materials for children such as coloring pages, paintings and educational comics. Originally a landscaper, Mallory developed a profound interest in water and wastewater treatment and learned about it by visiting plants, talking to professionals, and reading books. This article is an interview with Mallory talking about her background, her emerged interest in the water treatment and her vision for the future.

2 INTERVIEW

**SH:** Talk a little bit about yourself, your educational background and current profession.

**MC:** My name is Mallory Chaput and I have three Bachelor’s degrees from the University of Wisconsin Stevens Point. My degrees are in Biology, Business, and Accounting. I work as a landscaper and a free-lance artist specializing in creating water and wastewater related topics and in my free time I study the subject matter, trying to learn as much as I can so that I can better incorporate my knowledge into my art.

**SH:** What brought your interests toward water and wastewater treatment?

**MC:** It all started with a simple walk and a profound curiosity after recently moving to an unfamiliar city. When I was looking for coyotes with a close friend of mine, I remembered hearing this beautiful and conspicuous sound coming from a set of buildings behind a row of trees. This was a very intriguing noise. I always thought that it was some manufacturing plant. The orange glow of the lights and the loud humming of the machines stuck with me. One day, when I was using Google Maps, I was looking around for some parks in my local area that I could walk around with my friend to look for coyotes, I found a beautiful park that looped around the plant with a fountain. I noticed these large circular tanks on the map and was extremely interested in seeing them in person. When we went to the fountain park, I was absolutely awed by the buildings and tanks that seemed to wrap around the park. There was a complex smell coming from the place as well, it smelled like vanilla and a floral laundry detergent, which also fed into my curiosity. I researched the name of the Water Reclamation facility, and immediately fell in love. I am a well-seasoned fish keeper with a keen interest in water in general. Having knowledge about the nitrogen cycle, I put two and two together, and delved deeper into this subject matter. I love the mechanical aspects as well, because as a child, I have always loved robots and machines. I love anything to do with water and I consider myself to be an environmental advocate.

**SH:** Talk about your unique artistry and vision on how you will use your artwork.

**MC:** I am inspired by the small and unrecognized aspects of life that are taken for granted every day. We take for granted the trash collectors that work so hard to keep our streets clean. We also take for granted custodians and other sanitary workers that keep our environment safe and clean. These are essential workers. We use the bathroom, take showers, clean laundry, and use water every single day and never think about the convenience that it brings to our lives, because out of sight, out of mind. We never meet the wastewater and water workers because a lot of the time, the facilities are hidden, tucked away, and forgotten. Since these people are out of sight, we must go out of our way to find them, and with the busy lives people live every day, they just don’t have the time to search for these workers. It is my job to show the public in a beautiful way, the services that wastewater and water workers perform every day. They risk their lives to supply our water and clean our wastewater so that we don’t get sick. I plan to make and publish coloring pages and comics for the workers and the public with information about these plants and their mechanisms. I plan to create beautiful children’s coloring pages and comics for the workers and the public with information about these plants and their mechanisms.
books about water. Lastly, I am creating flashcard paintings of the different terms of water, to help people study the terms, as well as get the public to remember the terms as well. I believe that this will grab people’s attention and bring more recognition to essential workers in the water industry.

SH: How are you working to learn more about the topic of water treatment?

MC: I have been educating myself about the topic more by reading all the Sacramento water and wastewater manuals along with the wastewater engineering books. In addition, I have purchased an AWWA potable water treatment manual. Furthermore, I am a member of several water-related Facebook groups, and within that, I am learning a lot! Doing collaborative art projects with other people has also helped me tremendously in my learning process. I have also subscribed to a few of the water related magazines and podcasts. In September 2021, my husband recently got a job at the potable water treatment plant, so that has helped me greatly in learning the day-to-day life of an operator in the industry.

SH: What are some of the challenges faced by women in the water sector (from your friends’ experience) and how can art help address this?

MC: Some of the main characters of my children’s books and comics will be women, so with that I am hoping to bring to light that the water sector needs to be gender indiscriminate. In my paintings, I will have an equal amount of feminine and masculine themes, because the reality is, us women, being such thoughtful caretakers, are a very important part of the water sector. We are as capable as any male in the sector, in fact, roles are gender indiscriminate as well. For example, a man can be a homemaker and a woman can be a wastewater operator, and there is nothing wrong with that. Unfortunately, because of older mindsets, some men will take offense to women entering the water sector. As I have seen posted in forums and in articles, these women are not given the same opportunities and are treated disrespectfully. It is harder for women to start out in the water sector. One of my friends in the industry told me that it takes twice the effort for women to prove themselves and they must have a perfect record to move up the ladder into managerial positions. I am hoping that there will be changes in the future for the water industry that is inclusive to people of different backgrounds.

SH: For you, water treatment is not just science, but art. How do you hope to inspire young men and women through your work?

MC: There is a hidden beauty in wastewater treatment, like a beauty in the disgusting. Even the smells coming from the wastewater treatment plant, the smell of vanilla and flowers that the bacteria are creating is a beautiful thing. We are beautifying the water that we use by cleaning it. We are using the sludge as fertilizer to grow new life, such as beautiful flowers. Even just the sights and sounds of a wastewater plant are beautiful. It goes without saying that potable water treatment is also a beautiful industry. The engineering, design, and architecture of these plants is beyond spectacular. The sacrifice, care, and hard work that people put into the facilities is beautiful as well! I express my appreciation of the beauty of the water sector. I love to paint about science, because the truth is, science and nature is a beautiful work of art. When people see my work, they will see my expression of this beauty, thus inspiring them to think about what happens to our water. They will see the details of this beautiful process through my art.

SH: Talk about the children’s book you are working on?

MC: I am hoping that the Children’s books will be bright and beautiful with a fictional theme so that they will draw chil-
dren in and get them interested in the water treatment sector. In the books I will be discussing the life of the wastewater operator, who is a female dinosaur, and she will be walking the children through the steps of wastewater treatment. I will also be explaining about drinking water and how it is treated as well. I will connect drinking water to the rest of the water cycle and show how it also connects to that very same character. This book will take a lot of planning. At the moment, I am working on a comic bit that is loosely planned, it is a helpful conduit into making the children’s book series. The books will be painted instead of drawn and take some time to make and plan out.

SH: What according to you should the water industry do to empower gender equality and how do you think art can help with it?

MC: It starts with our education system, which I hope teaches and enforces younger people to respect each other’s differences and empower each other with our differences, which includes our gender differences. The water industry should be an equal opportunity employer and should abide by the laws that protect us from workplace discrimination. In my artwork, if I create both masculine and feminine themes and tie them together, that will create an environment that is conducive to all genders and sexual orientations. For example, I will be creating aliens, trucks, and motorcycles alongside flowers, butterflies, ponies, and rainbows. I will also be displaying characters that are female, male, and transgender which will help to encourage a more welcoming environment for everyone, no matter what their gender. I create artwork with gender neutral themes and feminine themes to include women and all genders into the water industry. The interactions between male and female characters in my water related art will display love and respect in their interactions.

SH: What is your message to newbies wanting to pursue a career in the water sector?

MC: This career is direly essential and needs to be brought to the public eye more often, alongside the nurses, doctors, police, firefighters, and other essential workers. The water sector is a very rewarding industry and garners great respect from the people who recognize it. The job is stable, because there will always be a need for potable water and wastewater treatment. As technology improves and safety increases, this job will be even more comfortable and satisfying. The pay and benefits of this job are great and for the time being, there is not a need for a college degree, yet the pay is as high as college degree earners. It is encouraged that one obtains as much education as possible when entering the water sector. I have seen from my husband’s and other peoples’ experiences that the job is laid back and exciting at the same time. You are outside a lot, which is good for your health and mental well-being. The water groups on Facebook are a phenomenal way to obtain very useful information.

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Mallory holding an abstract painting of a clarifier.
SH: Please share your social media details with our readers

1. You can find me in Instagram:
   its_art_about_water_treatment
2. My Facebook profile is a good place to find entertaining posts about the water industry:
   https://www.facebook.com/groups/water.industry
3. My LinkedIn page is called
   It’s Art About Water Treatment
4. Also to anyone wanting to learn about the water industry, the Facebook group, “Water/Wastewater Plant Operators of the World, Unite!” and “Southeast Water and Wastewater Operators” and “Women of Water and Wastewater” have been the most exciting and educational groups out there.

In summary, Mallory is a living example that engaging in creative pursuit can stimulate creativity and encourage tenacity towards the water sector. There have been artists inspired by various science and technology topics. Mallory stands out in being unique and the only known artist (to my knowledge) that expresses her interest in water treatment through art.