

Plant 1,700 longleaf pines in under three hours? Yes, we did!

It was a dark and stormy morning. No, really, it was! With grey skies, temperatures in the mid-thirties, and a stiff breeze whipping through the bare trees, I waited for our restoration volunteers at the Weeks Bay Foundation office. To say I was a little nervous that no one would show up is an understatement. Who in their right mind would spend their Sunday morning planting trees in the mind-numbing cold?

A little backstory. When the Weeks Bay Foundation purchased the Rio Vista property in 2017, we acquired an amazing piece of property with some big challenges. Although the tract had over 2,000 feet of frontage on Fish River, beautiful sandy riverbanks, and thriving pocket wetlands, there were also areas that weren't doing so well. The uplands in the property had been logged before we acquired it, and had more bare ground than trees on it. We were starting to see erosion problems and a surge of invasive plant species.

Through funding from the EPA Gulf of Mexico Program, the Daniel Foundation, and Baldwin County Sewer Service, the Foundation started the process of returning the property to a healthy, balanced ecosystem. The end goal of the habitat enhancement is to create a public preserve. As we talked about steps forward, we knew community engagement was important. Getting our neighbors involved would help them feel invested in the project and connected to the land, land that would eventually be theirs for recreation and education. This idea formed the basis of the "I Restored" campaign.

On January 20, I watched in awe as people from all over our coastal area filtered into the Foundation parking lot to carpool to the site and become part of the first "I Restored" volunteer day. Bundled in jackets, scarves, and gloves, they were surprisingly eager to help us plant baby longleaf pine trees. Fortified by hot apple cider and warm donuts, they gathered bags of tree plugs and tools and scattered across the 23-acre property.

Walking through the planting, it was amazing to see the wide array of volunteers. Students from the University of South Alabama Marine Sciences Club worked alongside families from Daphne. The National Charity League members planted beside a Mobile Bay harbor pilot. Participants ranged in age from two years old to early seventies. One young participant was there with his mom, brother, and grandma. His birthday was a month away. He chose one of the young pine trees, and as he carefully put it in the ground he said, "This is my birthday tree! Once this is a park, I will come back and check on my birthday tree. I will be much bigger then, and so will it."

As we dusted off our hands and piled the empty tree bags and muddy tools into the truck several hours later, there was a consensus that despite the weather, the brambles, and the hard work, it had been a great day. Over two and a half hours, 60 volunteers planted 1,700 longleaf pine trees. And each volunteer could proudly say, "I Restored Rio Vista."