

PRESS RELEASE

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Caption: [Images available upon request]

‘Ding’ Darling takes the throne: Voted America’s Best Restroom®

At a special press conference on Oct. 22 at the J.N. “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge Visitor & Education Center on Sanibel Island, Cintas Corporation announced that the refuge’s Learning Lavatories were voted America’s Best Restroom® in its 2018 contest.

“We’re thrilled that the public is as wild about our restrooms as we are,” said Toni Westland, supervisory refuge ranger. “As one of 566 national wildlife refuges around the country, we saw the restrooms as a major missed opportunity for educating visitors, which is why our new Learning Lavatories encourage visitors to become entirely immersed in refuge habitat and wildlife. We are the first in the entire national refuge system to have a restroom like this, and winning this award is a real honor.”

Cintas revealed the 10 contest finalists on Aug. 6 and opened voting to the public through Sept. 18 on its website. In the finalist round, “Ding” Darling was up against nine other restrooms in towns and cities from Green Bay, Wisc., to Chicago and New York City.

“We encouraged visitors and fans of the refuge to vote,” said Birgie Miller, executive director of the “Ding” Darling Wildlife Society-Friends of the Refuge, which raised the funds to turn the refuge restrooms into an artistic, educational exhibit. “We even had entire classrooms voting for us locally and as far away as Kansas.”

As the winner, “Ding” Darling received a banner and plaque to signify its “ascent to the throne.” Cintas also awarded the refuge the “revered restroom treatment,” which includes \$2,500 in Cintas products and services for restroom cleaning or facility management.

Cintas' judging criteria included cleanliness, visual appeal, innovation, functionality, and unique design elements.

“We clearly led in every one of those categories – especially innovation and unique design,” said Westland. “I guarantee, there’s no other restrooms like these in the world that are so devoted to wildlife conservation and environmental awareness.”

Funded by a \$125,000 grant from the West Coast Inland Navigation District (WCIND) and contributions from private donors AWC Family Foundation, the Middendorf Family, Laurie and Bill Harkey, and Chuck and Irene Raber, Project #LearningLav debuted in October 2017. It features educational imagery inside the lavatories and on the outdoor wall leading to them. The outdoor wall and ceiling mural immerses visitors in a virtual underwater experience, where they come eye-to-eye with 3D manatees and look up to see an alligator and other wildlife sculptures swimming overhead.

Inside, the lavatories were renovated to green standards and continue the interpretive underwater motif, featuring a photo-tile mangroves mural and more wildlife sculptures. Stall doors are wrapped with close-up professional photographs of refuge birds and identification information. Educational teaser messages were designed to entice visitors into the admission-free Visitor & Education Center to learn more.

“Besides educating visitors about our wildlife and habitat, the restrooms emphasize the importance of water quality and water itself as a vital resource to our livelihood and local economy,” said Westland. “We bus more than 8,000 students a year to the refuge. First stop is always the restroom. Now the learning experience can begin immediately.”

The #LearningLav project showcases the work of two artists. Sanibel artist Andrew Corke fashioned a mother and baby manatee out of recycled bike tires, while North Carolina artist David Williams sculpted other creatures out of foam and fiberglass. Williams painted the lifelike sculptures and one-dimensional aspects of the murals.

“We like to say that the restrooms have turned a ‘nature call’ into a ‘nature enthrall,’” said Paul Tritaik, refuge wildlife manager.

To learn more about the Learning Lavatories, visit www.bestrestrooms2018.com.

ABOUT DDWS

As a non-profit 501(c)3 organization, DDWS works to support J.N. “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge’s mission of conservation, wildlife and habitat protection, research, and public education through charitable donations and Refuge Nature Shop profits.

To support DDWS and the refuge with a tax-deductible gift, visit dingdarlingsociety.org or contact Birgie Miller at 239-472-1100 ext. 4 or director@dingdarlingsociety.org.

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