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Putting Together a WaterFire: See how MBA student Keegan Heston has played a vital role in Providence's iconic art installation this year

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Putting Together a WaterFire

See how MBA student Keegan Heston has played a vital role in Providence's iconic art installation this year



WaterFire Providence is arguably the city's most recognized event with average attendance from 40,000 to 100,000 per lighting. This lighting on Saturday, July 14, 2018 was dedicated to RWU President Donald J. Farish who died on July 5.

August 23, 2018 | Juan Siliezar & Justin Wilder

PROVIDENCE, R.I. – Hours before a single fire is lit and the smell of burning cedar and pine flood the noses of the thousands of people in attendance, there are boxes that need to be unpacked.

The preparation for a WaterFire, Providence's award-winning art event that draws about a million visitors to the city each year, starts early. By 6 a.m. there are anywhere from 180 to 300 volunteers making their way downtown to assist the WaterFire Providence staff in bringing the event to light.

Helping organize those volunteers is Keegan Heston, a 2018 international business graduate who is taking an additional year at RWU to earn his master's of business administration.

[Video produced & edited by Justin Wilder]

Heston has been an intern on the volunteer resource team at WaterFire since February. The team he's on is responsible for the recruitment and management of all volunteers for the organization.

His tasks as an intern have run the gamut. He's made calls to recruit volunteers for lightings. He's solved problems volunteers have like scheduling and availability. And he's helped coordinate volunteer assignments for individual lightings.

It's all helped build his skills package. The calls, for example, helped Heston build confidence in his interpersonal skills while coordinating volunteers and helping them with problems added to his management skills.

But it's not all office work. During the summer, each time there has been a lighting, Heston has worked side by side with volunteers to make sure the event is set up properly and that it runs smoothly throughout the night. He unloads boxes, sets up guest stations along the Providence River and then helps pack it back up again, long after the event is over.

The July 14th Lighting:

The set up for a WaterFire lighting is an all day, all-hands-on-deck rush to get the event set up for an 8:20 p.m. start time. It takes a small army of volunteers – anywhere from 180 to 300 volunteers – working with the WaterFire Providence staff to make it happen.



The day starts before the sun is up. By 6 a.m. trucks set out from the nearby WaterPlace Arts Center to downtown Providence loaded with boxes and equipment for the night's lighting. Once downtown, they drop off the trucks, that have everything they will need for the day, at spots all along the Providence River.

Along with the skills Heston's built, his internship has given him exposure to knowledge he can apply in his classes this fall and to his future career.

"This internship has really opened up my eyes to the nonprofit world," said Heston, who'd never considered the field before. "I realized through this internship that this is something I'd be more and more interested in getting into."

The experience will also help him bring different perspectives to his upcoming MBA courses, he said. "I definitely have that real-world experience that will help me understand more about the concepts we learn in class."

It's not lost on Heston that WaterFire Providence is arguably the city's most recognized event. It was created by artist Barnaby Evans in 1994 and has catapulted in popularity as a community arts event since the initial fire.

Heston, who recently completed his internship at WaterFire, says walking along the river and seeing the blazing light from the bonfires shine an orange glow on thousands of people is an impressive sight to take in – especially knowing he and the volunteers played such an important role in bringing it all together.

"It's definitely a rewarding experience," Heston said.

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