

1st black woman president for 130-year-old Metropolitan Water Reclamation Board

The Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD) quietly made history this month by electing its first African-American woman president in its 130-year history.

Kari Steele, 43, an environmentalist elected in November to her second six-year term on the \$1.1 billion agency's nine-member board, was unanimously elected president on Jan. 10.

She is the only professional chemist on the board overseeing Cook County's seven sanitary and flood protection plants serving Chicago and 125 municipalities — including the Stickney Water Reclamation Plant in Cicero, the world's largest. Board presidents serve two-year terms.

"This year is our 130th anniversary, and it was in 2012, when I started my first term, that we elected our first female president ever," noted Steele, born and raised in South Side Chatham.

"Six years later, I have had women colleagues, and African-American women colleagues, come to my office with tears in their eyes. They cannot believe how the district has transformed, the groundbreaking changes we've made since then with diversity on the board."

When Steele was elected in 2012, Commissioner Terrence J. O'Brien was retiring after serving 24 years on the board — 15 as president.

MWRD's gender wall on board leadership was broken by Kathleen Meany, who replaced O'Brien as president. She retired two years later after 26 years on the board. Mariyana Spyropoulos followed Meany as president. She served two terms, then decided not to run again.

The board's gender and racial diversity movement is significant at this time, particularly following mid-term elections that swept in the most racially diverse and most female representatives ever in a freshman class of Congress; that led some to call 2018 the "Year of the Woman."

"That election inspires me still, looking at other African-American females excelling and accomplishing these achievements. It brings me hope," said Steele, daughter of one-time 6th ward alderman and retired Illinois Appellate Court Judge John O. Steele.

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New Metropolitan Water Reclamation District President Kari K. Steele at the McCook Reservoir, the largest of its kind in the world, which came online December 2017. On Jan. 10, Steele was elected the first African-American woman to lead the agency in its 130 years. | Photo by Edward Steave

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"As a minority, I know there are still a lot of changes that we are working to see, but I'm excited for my future," the board president said.

Steele obtained her degree in chemistry with a minor in biology at Xavier University in Louisiana. She started at the MWRD at age 19; she was an intern for several summers, working as a water sampler. She returned after college as a lab technician, then spent seven years as a water chemist for the Chicago Water Department, and six years as a formulating chemist at L'Oreal USA.

She lost her first bid for the MWRD board in 2010, then was elected two years later. She laughs about most people having no idea what her agency does.



New Metropolitan Water Reclamation District President Kari K. Steele engages youth in the Faith in Place Eco-Ambassadors Program, which encourages multi-faith involvement in earth preservation efforts. | Provided photo

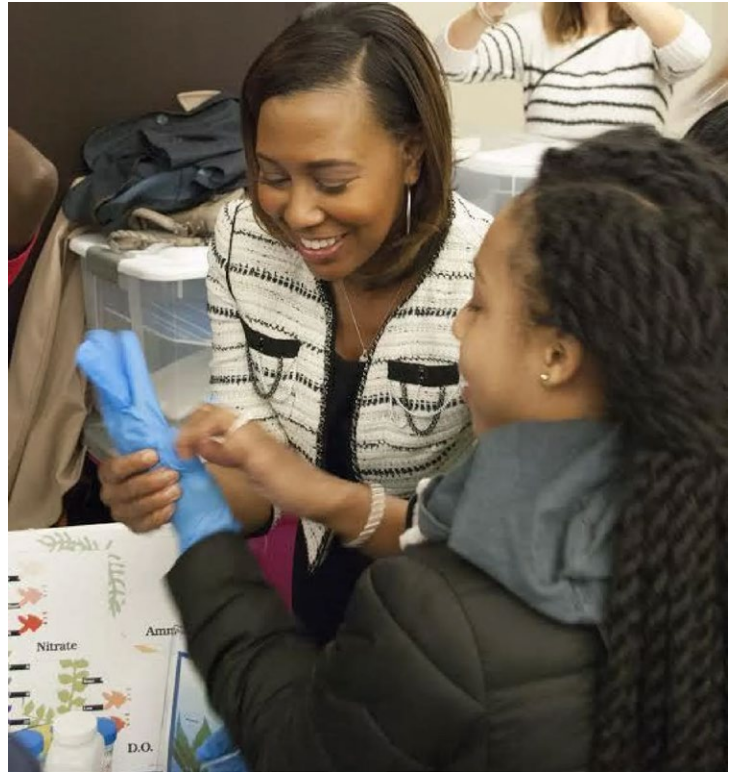
"Simply said, we treat waste water and we manage flood water. The difference between us and the city water department is that they supply you with the water that comes into your house. We treat the water that leaves your house," Steele said.

"We don't often think about it. But when we flush the toilet, run the dishwasher, wash our clothes, or take a shower, where does that water go?"

Outside of the business of running the board, her focus as president will be community involvement, Steele said.

"I want to make sure every community is aware of what we have to offer, aware of S.T.E.M. opportunities, whether it's career options or contracts, or just knowing about green infrastructure," she said.

"As a 19-year-old intern here, I never imagined I would become president of the board. So I also hope to inspire little girls that look like me to pursue STEM-based education and careers."



Metropolitan Water Reclamation District President Kari K. Steele assists a student during the Jr. Science Café in celebration of the Museum of Science and Industry's Black Creativity program exposing African-American youth to careers in science, technology, engineering, medicine and mathematics (STEM) fields. | Provided photo



Metropolitan Water Reclamation District Commissioner Kari K. Steele is sworn in for her second six-year term by Judge P. Scott Neville, on Dec. 4, 2018. On Jan. 10, her colleagues unanimously elected her President. | Photo by Dan Wendt

Ihejirika, M. (2019, January 25) 1st black woman president for 130-year-old Metropolitan Water Reclamation Board. *The Chicago Sun-Times*. <https://chicago.suntimes.com/2019/1/25/18341648/1st-black-woman-president-for-130-year-old-metropolitan-water-reclamation-board>