

# THOLOS

VOLUME 26

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## USBG HIGHLIGHT

A Career Fusing Art,  
Design and Plants

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## EMPLOYEE SPOTLIGHT

Honoring 50 Years of  
Historic Service

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Built to Last



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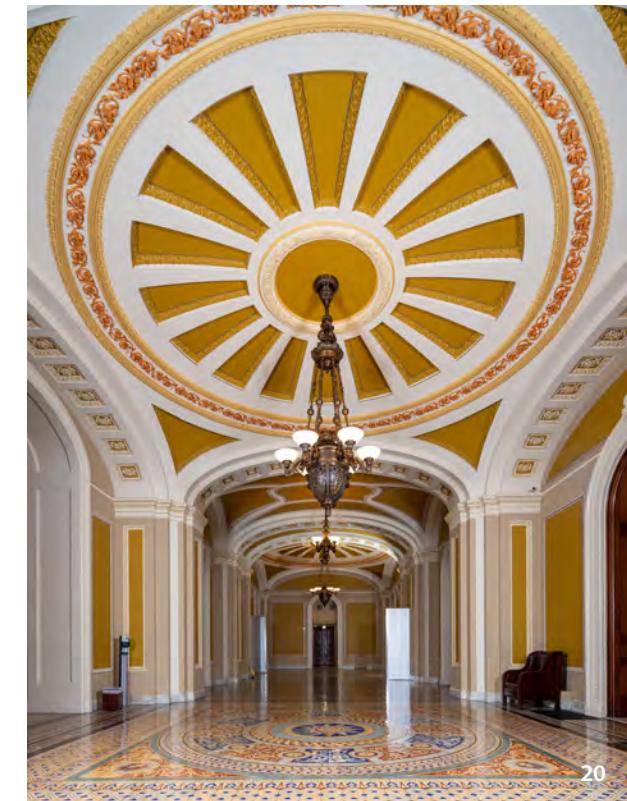
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USBG HIGHLIGHT

# A CAREER FUSING ART, DESIGN AND PLANTS

**Nick Nelson combines diverse passions into a landscape architecture career.**

WRITTEN BY DEVIN DOTSON  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY THOMAS HATZENBUHLER

When Nick Nelson was hired at the United States Botanic Garden (USBG) 15 years ago, he became its first landscape architect. While Nelson is the USBG's first landscape architect, the specialized career that is his passion today wasn't something he had previously envisioned.

"I was a bit of an artist in high school," Nelson said. "I enjoyed drawing, and my art teacher recommended architecture as a practical use for art. I figured maybe I had just found my career."

But Nelson also happened to be a golfer and even worked at a golf course in high school. He learned that the professionals who design golf courses were a different type of architect — a landscape architect — and he was intrigued.

When looking at college degree programs, Nelson found his parent's alma mater West Virginia University offered a landscape architect program — and did not offer a turf grass science degree that he was also pondering. "I decided that settled it," Nelson said. "I figured landscape architecture would let me combine my enjoyment of art with a way to connect with nature and the outdoors that I also wanted."





Nelson oversaw fabrication of these copies of a previously unused urn design created for the Capitol campus by renowned landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted.

**"I was very excited to apply to join the USBG as a landscape architect ... It was a great combination of my training with my art background and my experience in public gardens."**

Nelson entered the public gardens sector via a suggestion from his mother, a master gardener, who told him about a Planning and Design internship at Longwood Gardens in Pennsylvania. Not only was Nelson accepted into the yearlong internship program, but was hired as a contractor by the garden six months in.

"The four years working at Longwood gave me many valuable experiences with major projects, like designing parts of the indoor Children's Garden, and also expanded my understanding of world-class gardens through visits to other gardens around the world," Nelson said.

Nelson first learned about the USBG while working at Longwood; he and some others from Longwood did some consulting for the USBG on a potential Terrace Gardens renovation. Soon,

Nelson was driving between eastern Pennsylvania and Alexandria, Virginia, to spend time with his fiancée. He left Longwood and began working at a firm in Tysons Corner, Virginia, when he learned about the new landscape architect position at the USBG.

"I was very excited to apply to join the USBG as a landscape architect," said Nelson. "It was a great combination of my training with my art background and my experience in public gardens. Being a full-time position solidified that this was the job for me."

So what does a landscape architect do at a public garden like the USBG? Nelson designs and helps bring to life physical spaces in the USBG. If you've enjoyed the Terrace Gardens outside the Conservatory entrance, you've walked

through a garden space that Nelson helped bring to life.

"The very Terrace Gardens renovation project we had consulted on while I was at Longwood was coming to life when I joined the USBG," he said. Nelson oversaw the completion of the design work and then managed the implementation.

"I feel good about the final product — making the Terrace Gardens more inviting and providing more of a feel like you're entering a garden. I do love how the huge urn turned out — the scale

of it provides some excitement while approaching the Conservatory," Nelson said. "A benefit of having been here 15 years now, is that I also have gotten to see this and other projects mature and be fully realized. A garden is a living space, so that also means sometimes we revisit a portion or an element years later to either maintain it or update it."

Other major projects Nelson has helped design and manage include the Children's Garden renovation with new elements ranging from a Conservatory-inspired climbing structure to motion-activated misting poles and new raised beds to

allow kids to plant and water. Nelson collaborated with USBG Horticulturist Adam Pyle to transition a Conservatory house into a Mediterranean theme, with new structural and decorative elements like Mediterranean-tiled stepped planting areas and a Mediterranean wall mural to evoke that sense of place. He also designed the USBG's new, large name and logo signs working with the Architect of the Capitol's (AOC) Architecture Review Board for approval of those projects before later joining the board as the USBG's representative.



Nelson's first project as landscape architect for the USBG was to oversee completion of this redesign of the Terrace Gardens north of the Conservatory.

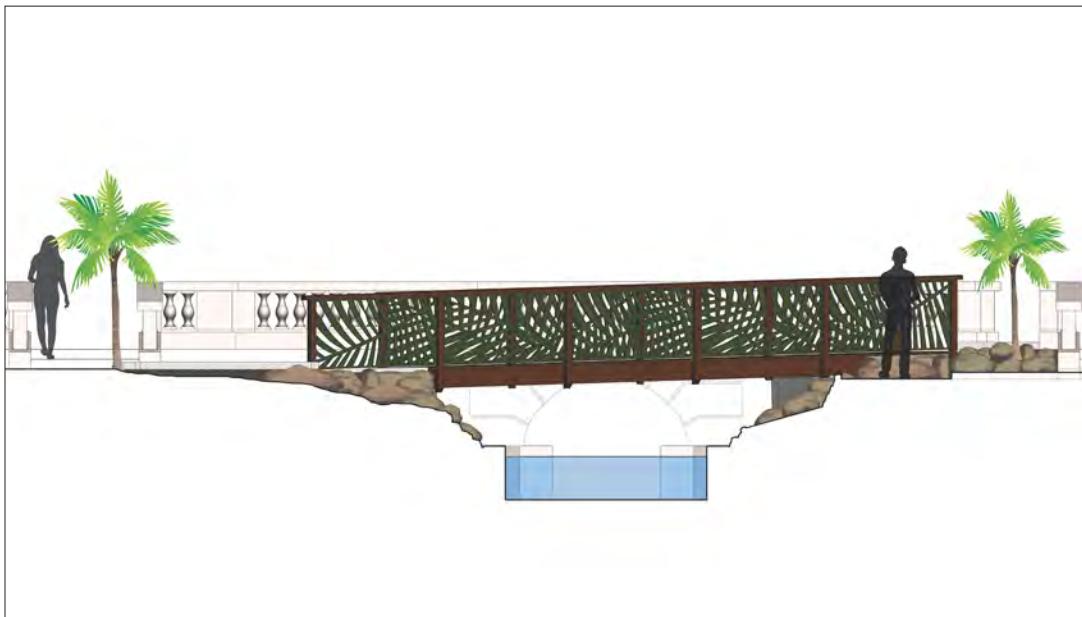


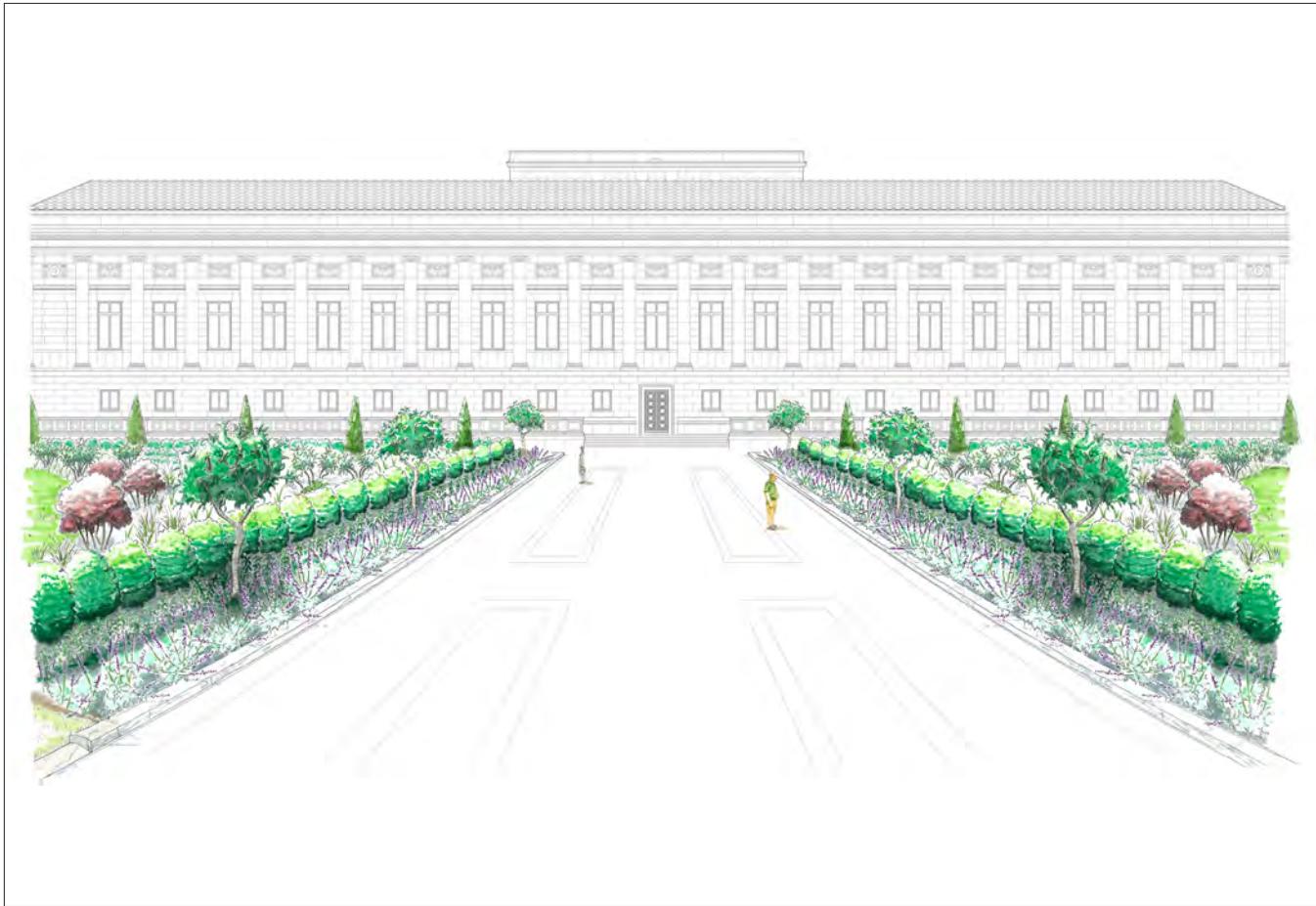
Nelson's job requires him to design with both people and plants in mind. You can explore one of his most recent projects when visiting the Tropics house. Nelson designed a new bridge to cross the central waterway. It's not only wider for more accessible use but also incorporates a plant-centric design. Nelson took a palm leaf shape and worked it into a railing that is safe and structural — and reflective of the environment around it.

"I enjoyed getting to work with other AOC specialists on this project," Nelson said. "The AOC Structural Engineer helped ensure the design met all load requirements, an AOC Electrical Engineer provided guidance to tap into existing power for lighting, and the AOC Construction Division worked on the stonework and electrical. We have a wealth of expertise throughout the AOC."

Through the years, Nelson's eye for design and contracting skills have led him to manage many exhibits ranging from the popular annual holiday exhibit to the annual orchid exhibit offered in collaboration with Smithsonian Gardens. "Everyone I meet seems to have been to the holiday show," Nelson said. "It's an instant connection and source of pride for me to have been able to help make it come to life for many years."

One of Nelson's latest projects was designing and implementing a new bridge for the USBG Conservatory's Tropics house. The design at right, is wider and more accessible. The photos above show the project completed and in use by visitors.





Nelson's design for updated landscaping at the Supreme Court of the United States adds more variety and color into the landscape while keeping some of the requested formality.

Nelson's impact on Capitol Hill extends beyond the USBG through consultations he does with other AOC jurisdictions. In 2016, Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy reached out to Stephen Ayers, the Architect of the Capitol at the time, to ask if someone could help come up with design ideas to improve the landscape on the north side of the Supreme Court of the United States. Mr. Ayers reached out to the USBG, and Nelson met with representatives from the Supreme Court team.

"Justice Kennedy wanted an inviting landscape design with more color, and the others especially wanted to keep the major hardscape elements the same," Nelson said. Nelson developed three landscape design proposals — one more formal, one naturalistic and one that was a hybrid of the two. The more formal layout was chosen and has been implemented to update the landscape.

"I love the diversity of this job. I never stop learning and growing because I'm always involved in new projects and exhibits that challenge me in new ways," Nelson said. "Also, the people here make the job really great. I love getting to work with so many other professionals at the USBG and the AOC."

Nelson's work is never done. From supporting the upkeep of previous projects to overseeing designs and implementation to keeping the USBG landscape designs functional and inviting, there is never a shortage of projects.

"I feel lucky to get to do work that I love," Nelson said. "It's great to be able to blend art, science and nature into garden spaces that showcase the diversity of the USBG plant collection for visitors to see and explore."

**"I love the diversity of this job. I never stop learning and growing ... Also, the people here make the job really great. I love getting to work with so many other professionals at the USBG and the AOC."**



EMPLOYEE SPOTLIGHT

# *Honoring 50 Years of Historic Service*

WRITTEN BY ERIN NELSON  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES ROSENTHAL

In today's fast-paced, instant culture, few things seem to last, including career tenures. Perhaps it's the charm of the historic campus or the weight of the symbolism it carries around the world, but at the Architect of the Capitol (AOC), it's not hard to find an employee who has spent their entire career serving this treasured institution.

One such employee is Donald Ward, Building Services Coordinator for the AOC's House Office Buildings.

His journey to Capitol Hill began in Newport News, Virginia, at Booker T. Washington Elementary School in Mrs. Campbell's fifth grade geography class. He was intrigued after reading a few short paragraphs about the House Page program in a chapter on Washington, D.C. Although Ward had never heard of the program, it lit a fire within him. At 11 years old he declared his dream of becoming a House Page, "That's what I'm going to be."

He went to local libraries and read everything he could about the Page program, when it began, why and how it was started, and he never missed an opportunity to share his dream with others.

At school he met a woman named Jessie Rattley; she was running for city council and wanted young people in the community to work on her campaign, canvassing neighborhoods, passing out brochures and informing the public about the importance of getting out to vote. Ward supported her ideas and was asked to join her campaign. He spent the summer working for her and was delighted when she won, "She went down in history as being the first Black member of the Newport News City Council. I was very proud to be part of her success in that small way."

Ward was 14 years old at the time, but he had not forgotten about the House Page program. He would often talk to Rattley about being a Page. He also shared his dream with John Fitzgerald, who worked with Rattley on the city council. Fitzgerald happened to know Virginia Congressman Thomas N. Downing, whose district included Newport News. Fitzgerald promised Ward that he would talk to the congressman and give him Ward's address so they could exchange letters. As promised, when Fitzgerald returned from D.C., he gave Ward the congressman's address and the two began a yearslong correspondence.

Downing's first letter to Ward informed him that he was very pleased to hear from him and glad to know that he was interested in the Page program. However, the program required participants to be 16; Ward was too young. The congressman asked Ward to keep him updated on his activities and to work hard in school. "So, for two years I worked feverishly to keep my grades up. I was a member of the Junior Honor Society. I kept myself involved in the community and just tried to be as involved and positive as I possibly could," Ward said.

"On April 29, 1972, I turned 16, sat down at my desk and wrote a letter to Congressman Downing, letting him know that I had just turned 16 years old, and I was ready to come to D.C. and be a Page."

In July, Downing called Ward's mother to tell her that he wanted Ward to come to Washington and be his Page. Ward was overjoyed, "I was so excited, so ecstatic. I had prayed every night for God to let me be a Page and sure enough that came to pass. That's how I came to D.C. From one little dream and that one dream has lasted over 50 years."

Ward arrived in Washington, D.C., on July 17, 1972. He served as the first Black Page from Virginia, and for him, that was quite an honor. He attended the Capitol Page School, which was in the Library of Congress at the time. Classes began at 6 a.m. and ended at 10 a.m., from then until Congress adjourned for the day, Ward and other Pages worked on the House floor, delivering messages and other items for Members across the Capitol campus.

Ward's time as a Page was also filled with experiences outside of Capitol Hill. He returned home to Newport News, which is also known for having the nation's largest privately owned shipyard and the only one in the United States capable of building a full range of nuclear-powered ships. Congressman Downing invited Ward and other staff to attend the commissioning of the newly completed USS Dwight D. Eisenhower. It was there that Ward met Mrs. Bates — her son was a classmate of Ward's at the House Page School — the two discussed the Page program and how much Ward had enjoyed his experiences in D.C. When he returned to Washington, Congressman Downing asked Ward if he remembered meeting her and if he knew who she was. Ward remembered their conversation but did not know her connection to Capitol Hill. He soon learned that she was the

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Ward prepares a room in the Cannon House Office Building, often used for congressional hearings and meetings.

wife of the AOC's House Superintendent C.M. Bates.

Ward had impressed Mrs. Bates so much that she had mentioned him to her husband. She thought he would be a wonderful asset for the agency. Ward met with the House Superintendent and was offered a position, becoming the first Black person to work in the Front Office of the House Superintendent. It was another honor for Ward, and he knew he needed to do his best, "I wanted to make sure that I set a good example because I knew that there were others that would be coming behind me; I wanted to make the road a little smoother for them in the process."

That was 1976. Nearly 47 years later, Ward is still working in the Front Office

for the House Superintendent, taking calls from Members of Congress and their staff, submitting work orders to House shops, and assisting staff however he can. "We also function as ambassadors to Capitol Hill. Many times, my coworkers and I are among the first people that new Members or congressional staff meet on the Hill. I always try to be a great, positive face for the organization and serve as an example of being kind, gracious and helpful," Ward said.

That is no small task. The House Service Center can receive up to 250 requests a day, serving 435 Members of Congress and 5,000+ congressional staff.

As the many calls and work orders come and go, so too have his coworkers. While some have stayed longer than others,

none have the tenure to match Ward. While it may be hard to see coworkers leave, he has been pleased to see a greater diversity among more recent hires, "We are all learning to be more considerate, kind and thoughtful of individuals' backgrounds and where we come from. We're learning how to show love and compassion. We're learning from all of our differences, which is a good thing, and when you do that, you help the world become a better place to live."

After 50+ years on Capitol Hill, some might wonder what has kept Ward here. "I enjoy what I do, number one. And number two, I realize that your job is more than a job or work. Many times, God places you where you can be a blessing to others. That's what it's all about."



FEATURE

# BUILT TO LAST

From Project Mastery to People Skills,  
Women in Construction Build Up the AOC

WRITTEN BY MADELEINE LUCCHETTI  
COVER PHOTOGRAPHY BY THOMAS HATZENBUHLER  
PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY BY SEAN GREENE



**LISA THOMPSON**  
Construction Representative

Lisa Thompson, an Architect of the Capitol (AOC) Construction Representative working on the Capitol Exterior Preservation — Stone and Metal project, likes to start her tours with a deceptively simple question. “What color is the Capitol Building?” she asks. The answer seems obvious — white? — but Thompson knows there’s more there than what meets the eye. Once guests have donned the proper protective equipment and climbed the stairs built into the scaffolding, Thompson pulls back a thick sheet of vinyl protection to reveal the building’s 19th-century façade. The original Aquia Creek sandstone is unveiled: rich in soft browns and grays, with rust-colored mineral deposits running in jagged lines across the blocks. In some areas, reddish deposits make the stone look pink.

Thompson is well acquainted with the U.S. Capitol’s West Front stone. She can show you burn marks from the library fire of 1851, a mason’s mark discovered on a windowsill and foundry marks stamped into the metal railings, all uncovered throughout the restoration process. She’s been working on the Capitol Exterior Preservation — Stone and Metal project with a focus on repairing and preserving the existing stone that encompasses the West Front. Many visitors and even Capitol Hill savants might not guess the meticulous efforts it takes to identify and repair cracks, spalling and disintegration. Once repaired, the stone will be repainted to match the white marble extensions.

The project is a significant undertaking, but the West Front phase will wrap up before the end of this year. Thompson has loved every minute of it. She’s been with the AOC for nearly eight years and says that the people around her feel like family.

Though the fields of construction and engineering are often male-dominated, many women across the agency lead or are involved in construction-related projects, each necessitating technical expertise and collaborative experience.

The substantial representation of women in these sectors makes it easier for Bonnie Holod, Assistant Superintendent, to approach progress in the field as a working professional. She comes from a long line of working women — and thanks to the presence of strong female role models, she’s confident in her own skin, no matter the environment or challenge.

“When I approach a construction site at the AOC, I don’t alter my behavior because I’m a woman,” Holod says. “If we are facing [figurative] barriers on-site, I find that humility breaks them down: trusting our tradespeople and their expertise. The ‘gender piece’ hasn’t come into play — and I think it’s because of our culture at the agency.”

Holod is pleased to see more women studying architecture, construction and engineering, especially as the work picks up. Inspired from a young age by architecture like Frank Lloyd Wright’s Fallingwater and Richard Morris Hunt’s Biltmore estate, she became a professional architect working on everything from schools to law firms before taking a position at the AOC in 2014. Ever since, she’s watched the AOC’s work expand into new plans and projects. Each, she says, is a gratifying challenge.



**BONNIE HOLOD**  
Assistant Superintendent

"It's an honor to be a steward of these buildings, to maintain the integrity of these buildings and make sure they're functionally flawless," she says. "These structures will be here longer than all of us!"

So, what's the best way AOC staff can preserve the Capitol campus' timelessness? Deatra Trinidad believes it's by staying current. As a Deputy Facilities Manager, she's involved in several projects at the Supreme Court of the United States and Thurgood Marshall Federal Judiciary Building. She makes it her goal

to stay abreast of best practices and technologies that can accelerate and innovate the agency's work.

As a child, Trinidad dreamed of being a roller coaster designer. Her talents led her to another sort of thrill — working on highly detailed, public-facing projects that involve diverse groups of stakeholders.

Trinidad studied mechanical engineering and came to the AOC in 2007 after several years in the private sector. She was looking for opportunities that would support a healthy work-life balance and

offer chances to grow her skill set. Thanks to her hardworking attitude and the guidance of mentors, including other women at the agency, Trinidad quickly became a go-to resource for her colleagues. She hopes to encourage other women to chase similar dreams.

"Find a mentor you trust, someone you can share challenges with," she says.

"Don't let the pressures of a predominantly male field get to you — your voice is important! There's always great diversity of thought if different people are brought to the table."



**DEATRA TRINIDAD**  
Deputy Facilities Manager

Find a mentor you trust, someone you can share challenges with. Don't let the pressures of a predominantly male field get to you — your voice is important! There's always great diversity of thought if different people are brought to the table.



**CHRISTINE DILLEN**  
Assistant Superintendent of Tenant Services

Christine Dillen, an Assistant Superintendent of Tenant Services, agrees heartily with Trinidad. Mentorship is her favorite part of her AOC leadership duties; she aims to empower her team and colleagues, giving them tools they need to be successful at work. As her family has grown, she has learned the value of a sustainable work-life balance and aims to lead by example by balancing her responsibilities.

Through the challenges, successes and failures that her day-to-day work presents, Dillen continually finds inspiration and motivation working alongside her team inside the beautiful buildings. Dillen's purview spans multiple renovation and restoration projects across different areas of the Library of Congress and its offices. As an Assistant Superintendent, she's often focused on the rehabilitation of the Thomas Jefferson, James Madison Memorial and John Adams Buildings. There, she spends much time focused on the development of office fit-outs, the restoration of ornate ceiling rosettes, and the challenging rehabilitation of building façades and roofs. She names communication as key to being a successful architect and leader.

"Being able to communicate effectively — whether you're speaking or writing to someone — is critical," Dillen says. "If I were to give future architects a word of advice, it would be to focus on communication skills and to take courses in technical writing. You can spend so much time formulating an idea, but you need to be able to convey it successfully, in order to have it executed."





**JENNIFER RHEAUME**  
Senior Project Manager

Jennifer Rheaume, a Senior Project Manager, takes this advice one step further — to her, good communication is also the best way to make connections, which have been instrumental to the success of her career. Even in the most hands-on fields, she says, soft skills are invaluable.

Rheaume has been involved with several restoration projects throughout her six years at the AOC, including recent rehabilitation to the historic Russell Senate Office Building exterior façade stone and windows. Soon, she'll begin work on the Dirksen Senate Office Building egress and accessibility project, bronze restoration and Russell Building interior stairwell upgrades.

Just as Thompson knows what's needed to keep the U.S. Capitol façade in tip-top shape, Rheaume knows how to build collaboration. Unlike other jobs, construction and engineering positions often require teams to come face-to-face on-site, creating prime opportunities to bond, whether over a new project or simply a quick coffee. Connections made in this daily environment are essential, Rheaume says, and she strongly believes that women in the field must support other women.

"Years ago, I realized that one of the hardest parts about being in a male-dominated field was trying to build professional relationships with upper management and be noticed for your work. Take

At the AOC, you have so many opportunities to advance your career and taking advantage of those has been instrumental in advancing my work. I think the women at the AOC have so much to say and so much to offer.

advantage of those social opportunities outside of work to interact and grow your professional connections as those can be invaluable," Rheaume says. "At the AOC, you have so many opportunities to advance your career and taking advantage of those has been instrumental in advancing my work. I think the women at the AOC have so much to say and so much to offer."

Now, she and others are continuing to uphold a legacy of women leaders at the AOC — united by their passion for the historic fabric of their work in fields that they love.



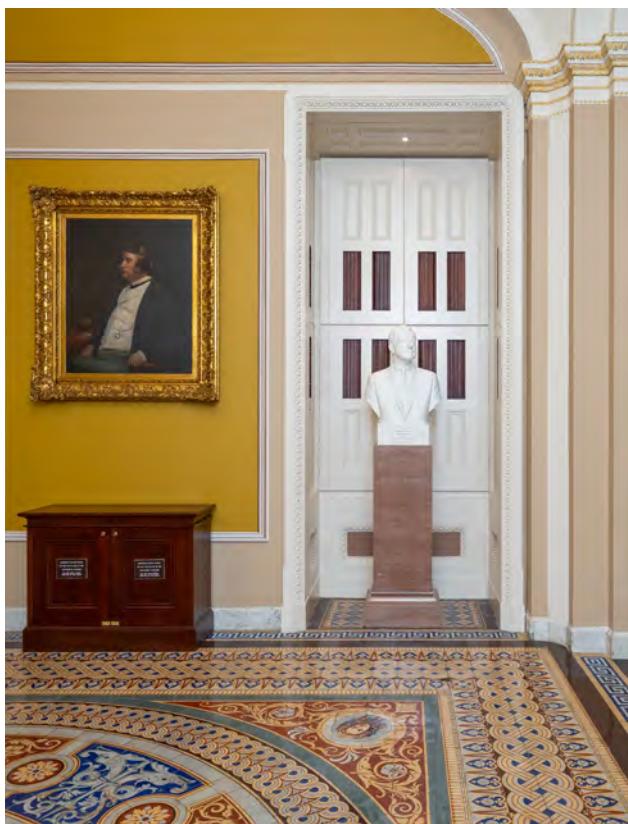
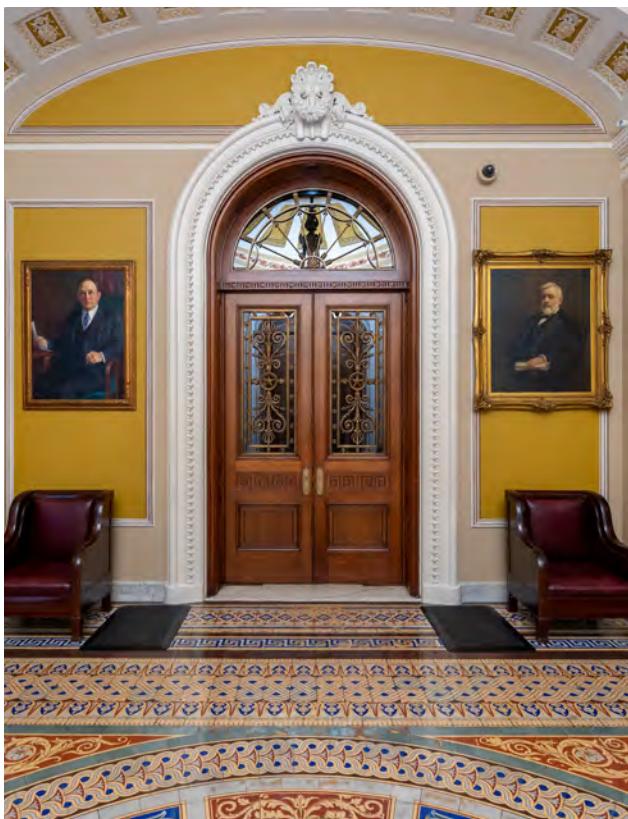
PROJECT UPDATE

## The AOC Never Paints Itself Into a Corner

WRITTEN BY JUSTIN KIEFFER  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY THOMAS HATZENBUHLER

Legislative and Public Affairs (LPA) often tasks me with providing project updates for Tholos. If you're a frequent reader of this publication you are aware I try to include a fun metaphor or throw in a few jokes (I throw in a lot, but LPA wisely edits the bad ones out). Every time I start writing the articles, the pressure of how to make the article fun and entertaining stops me in my tracks. As someone whose main tool is a keyboard and not a brush, I've done an amazing job of painting myself into a corner.

The same is *not* true for the numerous trades of the Capitol Building jurisdiction working on the Second Floor Plaster and Paint Repairs, which started in the spring of 2022. If you have not had the opportunity to roam the halls on the Senate side of the U.S. Capitol before June 2022, the plaster from the north, south and west corridors (adjacent to the Senate Chamber) was delaminating, which means its top layer was beginning to separate from the subsurface, causing cracks to appear and sections of plaster to fall.



Historic artwork and furniture were moved out of the corridors during the restoration work and returned once the area was finished.

This project's purpose was to repair the plaster in these areas and repaint; however, it is not as simple as it sounds. The project team had to consider corridor width limitations, hazardous materials, other workers, Senate sessions, etc. and that makes improvisation nearly impossible. This endeavor requires an in-depth plan to determine all the requirements, prepare documents, develop a budget, acquire funding, award contracts and create a schedule.

Before starting the main scope of plaster repair and repainting, a contractor was hired to temporarily relocate second floor historical artwork, including a Daniel Webster painting, several vice presidential busts, benches and the Ohio Clock, which has stood in the Senate halls since 1859. Additionally, the Capitol Building jurisdiction took the opportunity to remove and refurbish 10 chandeliers in the areas where scaffolding was used. The repainting was not as simple as covering the Capitol Dome with Dome White paint. A team including representatives from the Office of the Senate Curator, the Architect of the Capitol (AOC) Curator Division, the AOC's Historic Preservation Officer and Capitol Superintendent's Office as well as paint conservators had to complete a paint analysis to be used as a road map on how the space has been decorated since the Senate Wing Extension opened in the 1850s. Architect Marty Shore, who provided information on the paint analysis for this article states that, "the report researched 19th- and 20th-century archival documents such as Annual Reports of the Architect of the United States Capitol, receipts of paint and photographs of that era for any clues to the corridor's entire paint history. High-powered microscopes were used to determine when each of the paint layers were applied. The report provided a summary that organized the paint schemes into five periods of time."

The five different time periods included: Period 1: 1851–1865, after the north extension was constructed but before the earliest complete decorative painting scheme was installed; Period 2: 1865–1896, when the earliest known decorative painting scheme was in place; Period 3: 1897–1904, a short period of time when the corridor was finished in a simplified version of the earlier decorative painting scheme; Period 4: 1904 – early 20th century, the first campaign of nondecorative finishes phase of the corridor began sometime around 1904. The paint finishes of this period represent the first complete set of preserved finishes on all architectural elements studied; and Period 5: early 20th century to present, this period includes succeeding finishes, all nondecorative, after Period 4. The scheme selected by all parties is a modern interpretation of the Period 2 1865–1896 color scheme.

Larry Sizemore of the Capitol Building jurisdiction stated, "During preplanning we identified the multiple trades, including the Carpentry Division, Electrical Division, HVAC Division, Insulation Division, Mason Division and Paint Division that needed to be choreographed with one another throughout the project's schedule to make it cohesive and simple. A major

Along with the scaffold, lifts were used to reach portions of the work.





The almost-finished work carried out by the highly skilled artisans of the AOC.

challenge was scheduling the scaffold installation during times that would not interfere with the Senate while in session. The team was able to complete the majority of this during six different recesses (the covered walkways were built during each phase of the project) because of how well the contractors and in-house trade shops worked together.”

The scaffolding design had to serve the needs of four different trades during the project, requiring a huge, coordinated effort. After a contractor erected the scaffolding and the Carpentry Shop built the covered pedestrian walkway, the in-house Insulation Shop used containment areas to abate the lead paint on the corridor walls and ceilings. The Mason Shop then used the scaffolding to replaster the areas and then ceded the area to allow the Paint Shop to apply the decorative paint.

A covered pedestrian walkway was needed so building occupants and visitors could safely pass through the work areas. This was also a more complex walkway compared to some others in that it required drywall, lighting and fire alarm devices, including a smoke detector so that the area would remain code compliant.

As the phases progressed, the team got better and faster at completing the work even when the employees had to work in tighter corridors, while still maintaining a 44-inch passage width for egress and accessibility. With the scaffolding in place limiting access to the lower portions of the corridor walls, areas below the scaffolding deck could not be reached and were addressed after the scaffolding was removed. Basically, the team had to visit each area twice, performing abatement, plaster repair and painting on the upper portions of each area while the scaffold permitted accessibility and then revisited the lower portions of the area once the scaffolding was removed.

As I prepare to submit this article the project team is close to completing the sixth and final phase of the project and will move on to minor paint touch up and detail work. Members of the media are gleefully tweeting that the Ohio Clock and benches are back in the corridor. I know I am not painting the project team into a corner by saying work is anticipated being fully complete this summer — this team is always working in each other’s corner, not because they were painted into one.

▼  
Decorative  
Plasterer  
Raymond Andrew  
applies new  
plaster to replace  
the older,  
delaminated  
version.





MEET THE TEAM

# AOC UNIVERSITY

WRITTEN BY CAROL CAMPOS  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY KALEENA DWYER, SEAN GREENE,  
THOMAS HATZENBUHLER AND LUKE WALTER



Peggy Almanza welcomes participants to the AOC University Aspiring Leaders Program.

Last fall, the Architect of the Capitol (AOC) established AOC University under the Office of the Chief Administrative Officer to better align workforce training needs with current and future agency work requirements. The new organization was created by restructuring the former Training and Employee Development Branch (TED), formerly under the Human Capital Management Division. The goal of AOC University is to provide employees with a one-stop-shop for professional development and career growth, and to support the AOC Human Capital Strategic Plan to encourage a culture of continual learning and development.

AOC University encourages learning through a variety of teaching materials that make learning easy and accessible anytime, anywhere, in a variety of formats. AOC University learning tools are found in AOC Learn under "Training Opportunities." AOC Learn is a learning management system that includes online courses, informational videos and agency-sponsored training. In

addition, AOC employees also have 24/7 access to a large suite of on-demand personal and professional development online training courses, books and other resources through Percipio, a comprehensive learning platform provided by AOC University. Both learning platforms are easily accessible and contain a vast array of courses that allow employees to guide their own personal and professional development to achieve success in their present and future.

The AOC University team has a clear sense of purpose to make learning fun, increase employee engagement, encourage retention of valued talent and attract the next generation of AOC leaders. The talented and diverse AOC University team is led by Chief Learning Officer Peggy Almanza and is supported by newly hired staff and former members of the TED branch. The team took time out from their busy schedules to talk about their work and their goals for this new organization.

## Peggy Almanza

CHIEF LEARNING OFFICER

### **Q:** CAN YOU EXPLAIN WHAT A CHIEF LEARNING OFFICER DOES?

**A:** As the Chief Learning Officer, I am dedicated to providing strategic guidance to develop, support and maintain high-quality learning and development opportunities that foster the growth and development of the AOC's workforce.

### **Q:** CAN YOU SHARE A FUN FACT ABOUT YOU THAT MANY PEOPLE DO NOT KNOW?

**A:** I am a Texas girl that LOVES college football. Gig'em Texas A&M Aggies!



### **Q:** WHAT IS THE BEST ADVICE YOU CAN GIVE TO SOMEONE WHO IS JUST STARTING AT THE AOC?

**A:** Ask questions and learn from others, network with your colleagues, and get involved wherever you can. AOC employees have a wealth of knowledge and experience, and I learn from others each and every day. Asking questions, networking with others, and getting involved can provide an opportunity to experience the camaraderie and encouragement that comes from being a part of the AOC team.

### **Q:** WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST JOB AT THE AOC AND WHAT BROUGHT YOU HERE?

**A:** I started at the AOC in September 2010 as the TED Branch Chief within the Human Capital Management Division. I came to the AOC because I wanted a new challenge in my career, and I was eager to collaborate with employees of many different areas of expertise all in one agency. I served in that role until transitioning into the Chief Learning Officer (CLO) position in 2022 within AOC University. It has been an exciting time to lead the former TED Branch into the newly created AOC University, and I am thrilled to be serving in this new role as AOC University's first CLO.



## Betsy Johnson

TRAINING PROGRAM DIRECTOR

**Q:** TELL ME ABOUT YOUR ROLE AT AOC UNIVERSITY?

**A:** As the Training Program Director, I am responsible for the Training and Employee Development Operations, which include all aspects of training development, delivery, evaluation and management including Leadership and Management training, Career Development and General Skills training.



**Q:** WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE PART OF THE JOB?

**A:** There is nothing else more rewarding than seeing someone else succeed, and it means so much to me to know that we play a role in helping them succeed and develop. We recently relaunched the Career Development series, which consists of two workshops that assist employees with the AOC's application process, resume writing and interview preparation. Additionally, AOC University recently announced the pilot Aspiring Leaders program, which provides training and development opportunities for nonsupervisory/non-lead AOC staff at all levels to grow and succeed.



**Q:** WHAT IS THE BEST THING ABOUT BEING PART OF THE AOC UNIVERSITY TEAM?

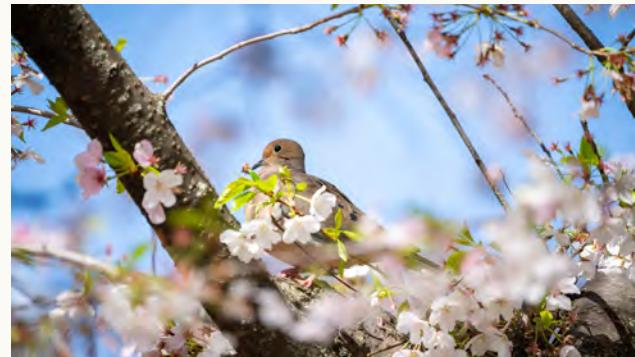
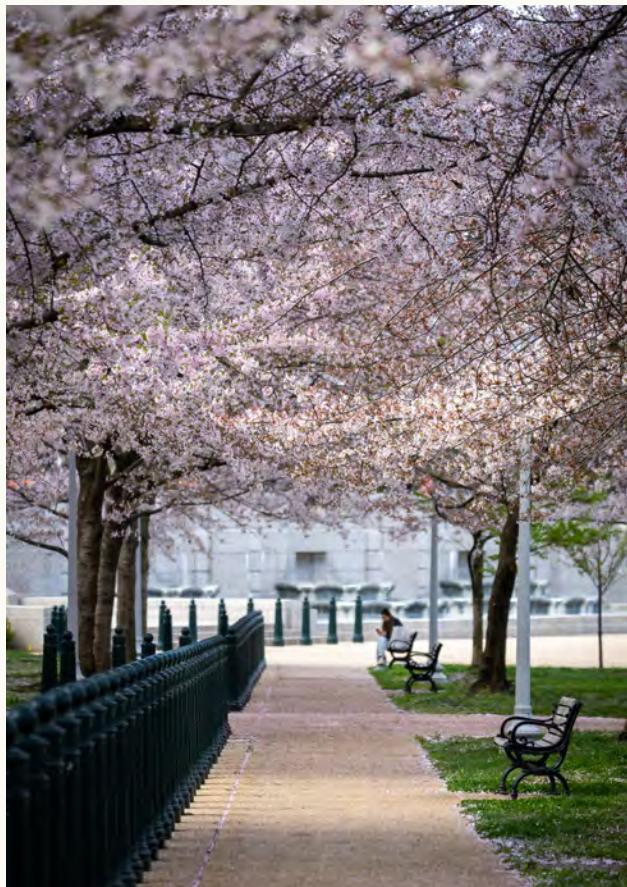
**A:** Being part of a team that supports employees in achieving their career goals. We have a great team that supports each other and are happy to assist in empowering employees to grow and succeed. As a new organization, we are a small team that supports the AOC, and every day I am in awe with the hard work and commitment to excellence our team displays. They truly go above and beyond to help and support all AOC employees.

# Bessy Plaza

TRAINING SPECIALIST

**Q:** DO YOU HAVE A FAVORITE CLASS OR BOOK AVAILABLE AT AOC UNIVERSITY THAT YOU RECOMMEND? WHY IS IT YOUR FAVORITE?

**A:** There is a course "Telling a Business Story" in the AOC Learn Percipio platform I would recommend to anyone that wants to present data or business concepts in a different way. It has been quite some time that "Who Moved My Cheese? An A-Mazing Way to Deal with Change in Your Work and in Your Life" came out about change with the characters Hem and Haw. I recommend "I Moved Your Cheese: For Those Who Refuse To Live as Mice in Someone Else's Maze." This is a short read but now you question the maze.



**Q:** WHAT DO YOU FEEL IS YOUR TEAM'S BIGGEST STRENGTH?

**A:** Our biggest strength as the AOC University team is the experience and talent we bring to the office. You can see this in a brainstorming session or in a working meeting. The ideas and out-of-the-box thinking can be a refreshing pace to work on a concept or situation.

**Q:** CAN YOU SHARE A FUN FACT ABOUT YOU THAT MANY PEOPLE DO NOT KNOW?

**A:** A fun fact about me is I study and practice permaculture, which is the design of food gardens to support the local ecosystem by utilizing available resources and the environment in a manner that does not produce any waste.



## Jessica Garcia

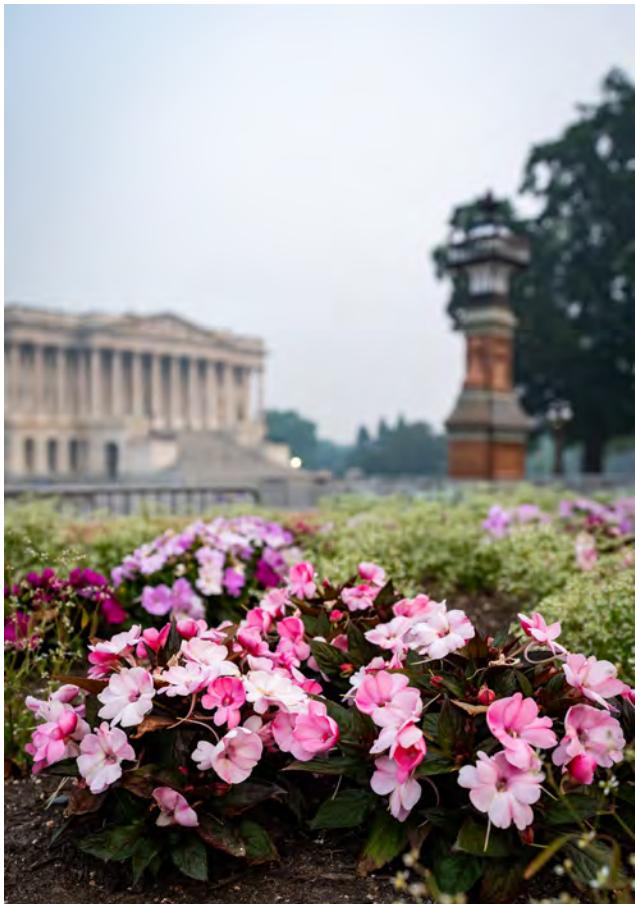
TRAINING AND LEARNING COORDINATOR

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### **Q:** WHAT ARE YOUR GOALS AS THE TRAINING AND LEARNING COORDINATOR FOR AOC UNIVERSITY?

**A:** As the AOC's first ever Training and Learning Coordinator, I am excited to see how the position can expand. My first goal is to continue to make the learning management system, AOC Learn, user-friendly and robust with courses and development opportunities. I truly believe as we continue to customize AOC Learn, we will be able to accommodate the unique needs of our AOC workforce. My goal is to ultimately have an online system where employees can explore and recognize their learning needs and aspirations at-a-glance and intuitively.

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### **Q:** WHAT IS THE MOST POPULAR CLASS OR CLASSES AT AOC UNIVERSITY?

**A:** Many employees have taken a liking to the Career Development series, once known as the CareerPath series. The series features two live courses centered around the AOC application process and interviewing as an internal candidate. I have assisted in producing for both courses through webinar and can certainly say they are a fan favorite.



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### **Q:** WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE PART OF THE JOB?

**A:** I can honestly say the people. I really enjoy helping others and feel fulfillment when I am able to impact a person's training and experience in a training. As we continue to develop AOC Learn and other systems, I feel through my experience here and the relationships we have developed, we are continuing to advocate and express needed content and system services for the workforce. I am so proud of the work we have accomplished thus far and feel genuine happiness for the impact it has had on helping employees with their training needs.

# Suzanne Mead

COMMUNICATIONS AND OUTREACH SPECIALIST

**Q:** IF YOU COULD GET A NEW SKILL IN 10 MINUTES, WHAT WOULD IT BE?

**A:** Painting. All you have to do is look around our buildings and be in awe of our painters. They are so talented and take such pride in their work.

**Q:** HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE AOC UNIVERSITY IN THREE WORDS? WHY DID YOU CHOOSE THOSE WORDS?

**A:**

- 1. Innovative:** It is a new way to approach organizational development for both the individual employee and the organization.
- 2. Empowering:** It provides employees with the opportunity to improve their current skills, develop new skills to make a career change, and prepare for future challenges in their current position as the AOC moves forward.
- 3. Personal:** It enables the employee to select the type of training that best suits their learning style.



**Q:** WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE THE TOP THREE SKILLS THAT EVERYONE SHOULD HAVE TO SUCCEED IN ANY JOB? HOW CAN YOU USE AOC UNIVERSITY TO WORK ON THOSE SKILLS?

**A:** Communication, time management and computer skills.

- 1. Communication:** Employees must be able to communicate in a clear, effective and efficient way.
- 2. Time Management:** Employees need to have the ability to use their time productively and efficiently.
- 3. Computer Skills:** Employees should have the capability to utilize computers and technology effectively.

Percipio provides many types of training to improve these skills. An employee could listen to an audiobook like, "Mastering Communication at Work, Second Edition: How to Lead, Manage, and Influence," while they are commuting to and from work. An employee could also take a course, "Expert Insights on Time Management," when they have approval from their supervisor to take the course during their tour of duty. Lastly, an employee could take a skill benchmark for Word 365. This evaluates their proficiency and recommends courses for knowledge gaps.

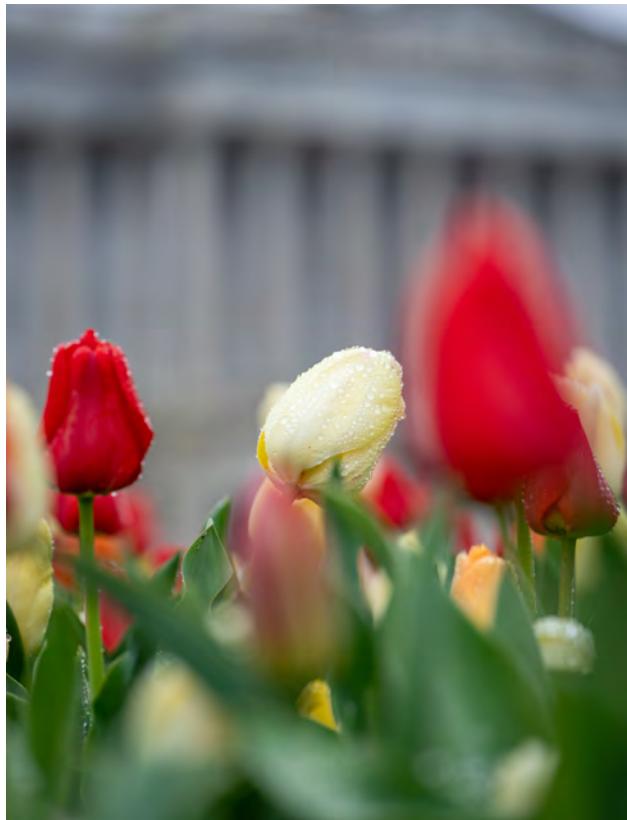


# **Jeremy Wiles**

SAFETY TRAINING SPECIALIST

**Q:** HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN WITH THE AGENCY AND WHAT BROUGHT YOU HERE?

**A:** I have been with the AOC for two and a half years. Prior to coming to the AOC, I worked at the Department of Health and Human Services, where I served as the Operations Director at the Federal Occupational Health (FOH) Training Center for 13 years. At FOH, I conducted Environmental Health and Safety classes, Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) office inspections, and General Services Administration food inspections for various government clients, including the AOC. When the opportunity to come work at the AOC became available, I could not pass it up.



**Q:** WHAT DOES A SAFETY TRAINING SPECIALIST DO?

**A:** I provide OSHA and environmental training classes to AOC employees, which helps the AOC meet regulation requirements. I also assist jurisdictions with scheduling training that I am unable to provide.

**Q:** WHY IS SAFETY TRAINING IMPORTANT FOR THE AOC? IS THERE A SAFETY TRAINING, BOOK OR CLASS IN AOC UNIVERSITY THAT YOU RECOMMEND FOR ALL STAFF?

**A:** Safety training is not only important for AOC employees, but also a requirement. It provides employees with knowledge and skills needed to perform their jobs safely. It also provides employees with information on how to identify and report hazards in the workplace. If I were to recommend one class that I feel all AOC employees would enjoy and benefit from, it would be the Adult First Aid/CPR/AED class that the AOC offers through the American Red Cross.



## **Martha Little**

PROGRAM SUPPORT SPECIALIST

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**Q:** IF YOU COULD GET A NEW SKILL IN 10 MINUTES, WHAT WOULD IT BE?

**A:** I think I would like to have a complete understanding of Excel, such as knowing all the shortcuts and being able to use the program to its full potential. There are 216 courses and 2,414 results for Excel in Percipio making it easier for anyone to start learning at any time.



**Q:** HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE AOC UNIVERSITY IN THREE WORDS? WHY DID YOU CHOOSE THOSE WORDS?

**A:** New, exciting and potential. As a new organization I think it is exciting to be in the building stages and be able to see how my input and work will shape it.



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**Q:** WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE THE TOP THREE SKILLS THAT EVERYONE SHOULD HAVE TO SUCCEED IN ANY JOB?

**A:** I think the top three skills to have in any job are effective communication, the ability to work with a team and organization. These three skills can make working and transitioning into new positions smoother and create a smoother path for future interactions. Communication is usually a starting point that will set your work performance. Being able to be clear about your expectations and being able to convey what you need clearly is very important no matter what position you are in.





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## THOLOS VOLUME 26

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