

Q & A WITH JOEL BAKER

TWA members and others are talking to writer Sharon Babcock about enduring inspirations, life lessons, and perspectives from their experiences on the working waterfront.

*This month's feature: **Joel Baker**, the science director of the Center for Urban Waters.*

Passionate about water, Professor Joel Baker holds the Port of Tacoma Chair in Environmental Science at the University of Washington Tacoma and is the science director of the Center for Urban Waters. He teaches courses in water quality modeling, environmental chemistry, and quantitative methods.



By training, Baker is an environmental chemist and civil and environmental engineer. He views the LEED Platinum Center, located on the Foss Waterway, as an economically vibrant, technology-based stake in the ground for the Tacoma community.

Q: What is critical about the location of the Center for Urban Waters on the east side of the Thea Foss Waterway?

A: This building is surrounded by private sector manufacturing and vacant land. It was sited deliberately between the Port of Tacoma on the tide flats and the city with the hope that this side of the waterway, the industrial one, will be built out.

It is a symbol of chutzpah—an LEED Platinum building sitting on a Superfund site surrounded by industry. I like that it is visible from downtown, that I can take my students to the roof to produce teachable moments—what's that? Where does all that steam come from? Where does the product from that grain elevator go?

As an urban university, UWT is open to community co-locations, for example locating a UWT criminal justice program in the same place as the police department. I am anticipating what that might mean for environmental students and the center. Currently we are a research center, a collaboration, and a facility with a community of environmental scientists, analysts, engineers and policymakers developing creative and sustainable solutions to restore and protect urban waterways. The unique intellectual environment brings together organizations with complementary missions and individuals with diverse skills to develop innovative approaches to environmental restoration as well as protection and sustainable urban development. The research at the center is led by the University of Washington Tacoma (and) the facility was developed by the City of Tacoma. City staff located in the building work on environmental services critical to the citizens of the community. The collaboration also includes the Puget Sound Partnership, a state agency coordinating efforts to restore and protect Puget Sound.

Q: What are the challenges?

A: I am an impatient person. I realize that building out the area around the center will take time. I do think it is time for that now. Part of what holds Tacoma back is a second-city mentality. If we look at the recent completed projects as demonstrations of “we can do it,” the leadership potential of those who have made things happen here previously and recent arrivals in the community, and if we make use of the impending population explosion expected for our locale, we can accomplish a lot. I believe we can think bigger. Instead of attracting only boutique water-based businesses, we can attract bigger businesses similar to what Milwaukee, Wisconsin, has done with the Kohler Company and Goulds Pumps.

Q: How has UWT’s change from a two-year to a four-year institution with more veterans present impacted the classes you teach?

A: In its role as a public-serving urban university with an emphasis on social responsibility, UWT has made a concerted effort to pitch college as a choice for veterans (separating from) the military. This has made a keen difference in the classroom. I notice when I give an assignment that instead of asking “do we have to?” the veterans ask “when would you like that?”

Q: What moments stand out to you since you have been involved with the center?

A: I recall two. First, the decisiveness on the part of Tacomans who wanted the center built and made that happen.

Secondly, one year after I arrived at the center I was invited to what I thought was simply a dinner. The event culminated in those gathered agreeing that “Tacoma is going to be the clear water capital of the world.”