

**Beyond Words Storytelling Competition – Delray Beach Chamber -Nonprofit Meeting
December 2nd at 11am.**

The Institute for Regional Conservation: Presented by: Liz Dutra and Kayla Mosteller

Title: “The Restoration Shovel”

I am just a shovel of steel, wood, and wear. I have no voice or heartbeat of my own. Yet in the places where earth meets intention, I witnessed hope, transformation, and more silent victories than many ever will. I was made to dig, but at IRC, I learned I could help restore nature.

My first day in the field, the sun rose over the coastal dune, home to a diverse array of species. Where sea turtles’ nest and seabirds soar, living in harmony. This critical habitat is under threat, trampled, invaded, forgotten. I am merely just a tool facilitating IRC’s mission to restore and protect biodiversity.

The volunteers who carried me were inquisitive and curious about ecological restoration. They spoke of possibility. As I dove into the sand, I felt the earth give, tired but willing. Together, we carved spaces, little cradles for life. Into those spaces went native plants, fragile but fierce, their roots gripping the soil as a promise to enhance biodiversity.

I remember so many hands. Young, old, weathered from work, soft from office desks. Some hands struggled with the unfamiliar weight of me, but they got the hang of it. And with each plant we installed into the ground, I felt the land breathe a little deeper, as if remembering what it once was.

As months passed, I traveled from the dunes and tropical hammocks to bustling urban neighborhoods seeking more green spaces. I unearthed stubborn roots of invasive plants, made room for rare species fighting for one more chance, and helped re-stitch ecosystems torn apart by time and human neglect.

But what stays with me most, are moments of connection.

A child once patted my handle as she planted her first native plant. “We’re giving the butterflies a home again,” she whispered, as if confiding in me. In that moment, I understood, humans weren’t just restoring biodiversity. They were restoring themselves, relearning how to belong to nature.

I’ve stood in the hands of scientists mapping out restoration targets with precision and purpose. I’ve worked alongside land managers who battle heat, mosquitoes, and exhaustion because they know each native plant could mean the difference between survival and ecosystem collapse. I’ve joined community members who showed up on their only day off, simply because they care.

The work is slow. It is humble. It is never finished. But every hole I dig is a doorway one that leads to cleaner air, resilient habitats, species diversity, and the rekindling of a beautiful relationship between people and nature.

I may be scratched, dented, and tired. But when I dig into the earth, I feel something bigger than myself. Renewal.

And I know this

A single shovel in the right hands doesn't just plant a seed.

It plants resilience.

It plants community.

It plants hope.

And hope, when nurtured, grows into forests, dunes, and ecosystems strong enough to carry life into the next generation.

I'm just a shovel.

But at IRC, even a shovel can help change the world.

