

Sustainability Hero



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Gabrielle Bennett-Meany

Coordinator, Belleville Green Team

Vice President, Belleville Board of Education (Essex County)

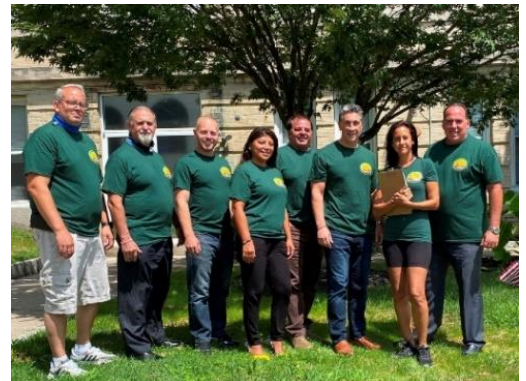
Gabrielle Bennett-Meany is the coordinator of the [Belleville Green Team](#), the vice president of the [Belleville Board of Education](#) and a Senior Natural Resource Specialist/Open Space Manager Specialist at the [New Jersey Sports and Exhibition Authority \(NJSEA\)](#), formerly the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission.

With over 30 years of experience as an environmental science educator and field naturalist, Gabrielle (Gaby) is always willing to share her extensive knowledge and work collaboratively on issues. She is a sustainability leader known for her passionate approach and clear focus in working toward solutions to create a better Belleville--her home of 32 years. Guided by a love of the natural environment, Gaby has spent her career raising awareness and integrating environmental education into schools, communities and homes.

When not teaching or speaking publicly on a variety of topics, Gaby is an active volunteer with the [Belleville Historic Preservation Commission](#), and an appointed member of the [Belleville Zoning Board](#) and the [#BetterBelleville Civic Association](#). She has served as the Home and School Association president of three Belleville schools--Elementary School Three, Middle and High School.

As the green team coordinator, Gaby has a track record of managing sustainability projects from the planning stage to securing the required grant funding and implementing the project. She provides a bridge between the municipal and the school district green teams. And, if that isn't impressive enough, Gaby also leads canoe and pontoon boat excursions that allow participants to see a view of the Meadowlands from the water and takes Belleville community members on educational hikes to places like the Lenape Trail.

"As the impacts from climate change accelerate and become more visible, I want everyone to know that the work we are doing in the community is important and it is not too late," Gaby said. "I'm lucky because my work has allowed me to do what I love. It's my privilege to share what I've learned spending time in nature and through field research with my neighbors and especially our students so that we can create a new generation of environmental activists who will prioritize sustainable initiatives and take local and global action."



Belleville Township: Sustainable Jersey Certified: [Belleville Township](#) achieved bronze-level Sustainable Jersey certification in 2020 and 2022. Gaby said, "Achieving certification was the culmination of a lot of spirited teamwork. We're lucky to have Mayor Michael Melham and the members of the Belleville Council because they support and push our group to do more. We have dedicated municipal staff and resident volunteers who work hard to make Belleville more sustainable."

The Belleville sustainability program includes community education and outreach, a [Tree Protection Ordinance](#), a [Sustainable Land Use Pledge](#), a [Complete Streets Resolution and Policy](#), a reusable bag education program, establishment of a [creative team](#), support of a community garden and recycling and waste reduction education and compliance. Belleville Township's sustainability actions are documented in the [2022 Sustainable Jersey Certification Report for Belleville Township](#). For more information, visit the Belleville Green Team [website page](#) and [Facebook page](#).

Belleville Creative Team and Designated Township Artist: Established by municipal resolution in 2020, the Belleville Creative Team advises the green team on art, history and culture in the community. The creative team named [Athena Zhe](#) the official Belleville Township Artist. Athena works with the Belleville Green Team and Creative Team on art installations. A visible example of this work is the 'Welcome to Belleville' mural. Gaby explained, "The mural is reflective of the township's sense of community pride and highlights Belleville's iconic cherry blossom trees which were planted throughout Branch Brook Park and are the street tree for the township." Belleville Township received 10 Sustainable Jersey certification points after completing the action: [Establish a Creative Team](#).

Pedestrian Safety Demonstration Project: The intersection of Holmes Street and High Street adjacent to Belleville Middle School is a site where hundreds of school-aged children traverse twice daily. Belleville officials applied to the [Complete Streets Technical Assistance Program](#) to help design simple solutions that could improve safety at the intersection. The program is funded by the [North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority](#), with technical assistance provided by Sustainable Jersey and the [Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center at Rutgers University](#).

Thanks to Gaby's leadership of this initiative for Belleville Township, a local volunteer team installed a temporary demonstration project to enhance safety at the intersection. The design included painted curb extensions with flexible posts and a cherry blossom mural designed by the Belleville Township Artist. With quick and low-cost improvements, the demonstration project improved crosswalk visibility at the intersection, and added art that reflects the community.

Belleville High School Art Club students helped with the painting, following a plan provided by Voorhees Transportation Center and reviewed by the township engineer. The Belleville Township Artist shared a [video](#) of the installation process on her Instagram. Gaby said, "Pedestrian safety is an issue at our schools. The school-related traffic was leading to frustration and becoming a safety issue. We decided to focus the township's demonstration project on an intersection that was also a problem for the school district."

Gaby enlisted the help of many different departments and community members to complete the project. Gaby said, "Our community understands that we must all work together to increase awareness of crosswalk safety for pedestrians and develop safe driving habits in these critical areas. This project is a step in the right direction."

This project was just one of several ways Belleville has been working to create vibrant, safe and welcoming streets. In 2022, the township adopted a Complete Streets Resolution and Policy and created a strategic branding plan for the Washington Avenue Commercial District through the [Together North Jersey Vibrant Places Program](#). In addition, the township received a [New Jersey Department of Transportation 2023 Safe Streets to Transit Grant](#) to improve safe pedestrian access to the Belleville Silver Lake Light Rail Train Station.

Community Pocket Park: Gaby is proud of the green team's project that turned an irregular lot, overrun with weeds, into an active space for all Belleville residents to enjoy being outside. Using a [2022 AARP Community Challenge Grant](#), Gaby spearheaded the plan which created a community pocket park at 321 Division Avenue across from the high school.



Gaby brought together Belleville Township, the Belleville Board of Education, the Essex County Board of Commissioners, Mayor Michael Melham, Township Manager Anthony Iacono, Councilman Vinny Cozzarelli, Superintendent of Schools Dr. Richard Tomko, Board of Education member Ralph Tunis, County Commissioner Vice President Carlos Pomares and other officials to support the project. Gaby and the team created a park with three dynamic components: a pollinator garden, display space for public art and a painted rock garden.



Planter boxes will house the park's pollinator garden to be populated with purple coneflowers, bee balm, swamp milkweed and New York aster. The art wall display forms a backdrop for the garden. It is lined with 12 poster boxes that hold art. One of the first art installations had artwork with inspirational messages created by Belleville High School art students. Gaby explained, "The idea is to occasionally switch out the art, allowing students from across Belleville a chance to contribute to the park's experience. A kiosk in the front of the park has more information about the display and we promote it on the Belleville Green Team social media." The poster displays will also focus on spotlighting environmental themes such as reduction of single use plastics.

The third interactive component of the park is the rock garden. Residents decorate rocks at the park or at home and leave them in the garden. The [Women's Club of Belleville](#) and the Belleville Green Team have had special rock painting events. In April 2023, Better Belleville built and donated a garden arbor to add to the entranceway. Gaby said, "The community pocket park is dynamic. We might promote butterfly art, or have a concert, or allow the space to serve as an outdoor classroom where Belleville students visit to learn important lessons about why native species are preferable to invasive ones. I'm excited about the potential."



Belleville Municipal and School District Green Team Collaboration:

Thanks to the connection that Gaby provides, the Township of Belleville Green Team has a strong partnership with the School District Green Team. Gaby works with the High School Science Club and has partnered on events for Earth Day, Arbor Day and National Trails Day. The first annual green fair was held outdoors at Belleville High School and was a partnership between the municipal and school district green teams.



Gaby also leads a Monarch butterfly tagging program for the high school environmental science class. Students are guided through hands on environmental projects and learn about invasive plants, gardening for wildlife, pollinators, butterflies and endangered species. Gaby said, "These projects are designed to meet the needs of the next generation of environmental leaders. The goal is to encourage teens to be effective environmental advocates and conservation leaders in their homes and communities."

Water Conservation Education and Outreach Program: Working with the High School Science Department, Gaby and the Belleville Green Team hold water quality monitoring programs with students and stream cleanups. In 2021, Belleville Township received a \$10,000 [Sustainable Jersey Grant](#) funded by the PSEG Foundation. The grant will fund a water conservation education and outreach program that will be created in partnership with the Passaic Valley Sewage Commission and New Jersey Sports and Exposition Authority to teach residents, businesses and school children about the importance of water stewardship. Belleville Township and Belleville Public Schools have received a total of over \$40,000 in Sustainable Jersey grants.

More About Gaby: Gaby earned a B.A. in English and a Master's in Environmental Science Management from Montclair State University. She has lived in Belleville for 32 years with her husband, Christopher Meany. The couple has two children, one is a recent graduate of Belleville High School and the other a graduate of New Jersey City University. In her spare time, Gaby enjoys gardening, kayaking, hiking and cooking for her family. Her family background combines Italian and Filipino heritage, so she serves up specialties ranging from Chicken Parmigiana to fried rice and her famous holiday cookies that are an annual tradition. She even makes homemade dog treats for their new dog Pitch, a Labrador mix.