



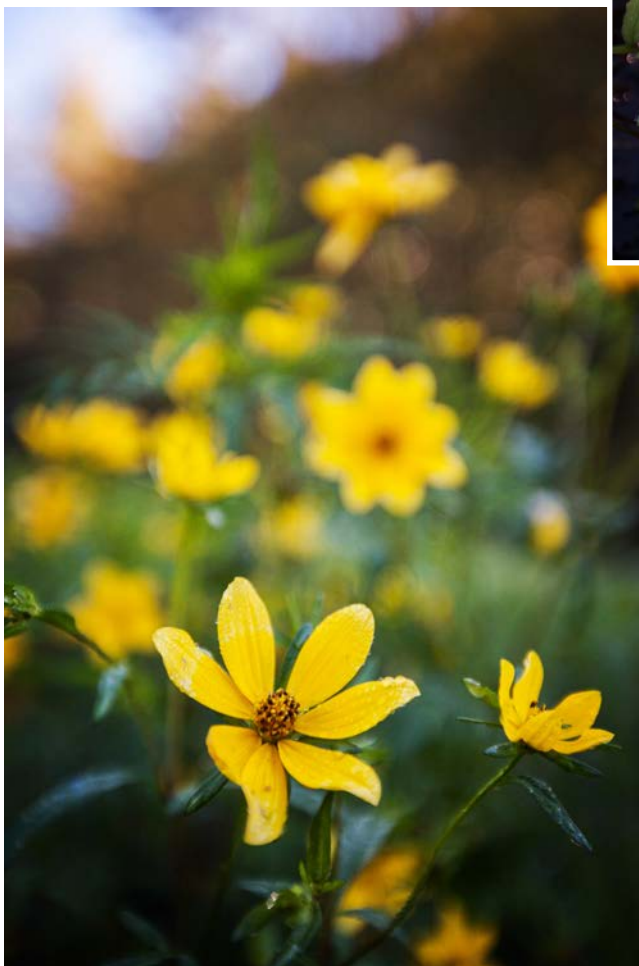


The Peace of Wild Things

Wendell Berry

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

Kentucky is ideally positioned to lead the region in the movement to get people outdoors, where they can reap the countless mental and physical benefits that nature provides. Kentucky's lush and diverse ecology, its many national designations for wilderness, recreation, and geology, and its old growth forests make nature immersion



opportunities abundant. Red Oaks Forest School is committed to fostering a deep and lasting connection to nature through exploration and education, while also instilling the importance of wonder, community and compassion.

In today's world, children are overprotected, overstimulated, and overdirected. In a mindset geared towards constant protection, how can our children discover their own identities? In the noise of overstimulation, have we lost all the spaces where they can feel their senses come alive – spaces that open the door to inspiration, creativity, and imagination? How can they show us they are strong and capable, confident and happy, if they aren't given the freedom to do so?

The four years since co-founding our forest school have shown me that nature immersion is a powerful tool for providing a safe place for kids to be themselves and trust their instincts, how mental and physical healing benefits abound, and that it's rooted in compassion. The idea is simple: commit to time in nature, value it like any other thing on your schedule, and then show up – rain or shine, hot or cold – and be present. Explore together, share

stories, wonder, try, fail, fall down, triumph over adversity, and just...breathe.

—Tina Brouwer, *Executive Director*





VALUES

At Red Oaks, we are always learning and growing! It's how we learn and grow that sets us apart. Every learning experience at Red Oaks – every class, every initiative, every activity – has its roots in these core values.

Nature Immersion

Everything we do at Red Oaks begins with the simple act of stepping outside. By stepping out of the rush of modern life and into the natural world, we create space for exploration and discovery, wonder and awe. We root ourselves in compassion and community, and, together, we flourish and grow.

Wonder

Experiences of wonder and awe in nature awaken us to our deep interconnectedness with the land and all of its inhabitants.

Exploration

In our untamed forest playground, we are free to discover and invent, to challenge our minds and bodies, and to build the confidence we need to overcome adversity.

Compassion

Being surrounded by nature encourages us to shift our attention outward, fostering a deep love of the land and a desire to tread gently on our beautiful and finite Earth. From this foundation of interconnectedness, we reach outward with empathy, understanding, and generosity toward others.

Community

At Red Oaks, we know that we are all part of something bigger. As we learn, help, share, and grow, we cultivate a spirit of teamwork and collaboration within our group and beyond. We play together, we work together, and, together, we are stewards of our planet.





The Issue We Face

The Red River Gorge area is among the most beautiful, unique, and ecologically diverse regions anywhere in the United States, with many national designations for its protection. Unfortunately, the riches of the land are not reflected in resources for local residents, many of whom struggle with poverty, ill health, and limited educational opportunities or funding. These inequalities can be particularly hard on children and are exacerbated by disturbing national trends.

Diagnoses of anxiety and attention problems are increasing as children experience enormous pressure to perform academically and have less and less time to call their own. Education budgets are slashed, funding for the arts and physical education programs are lost, and recess time is shortened or eliminated as

school systems increasingly focus on preparing students for standardized tests. Children spend more time than ever indoors, replacing the natural world with a virtual one, and often have limited access to healthy foods. Not surprisingly, almost a third of children in the U.S. are overweight and type 2 diabetes, once unheard of in

adolescents, now rivals type 1 in new diagnoses. These problems are hitting low-income areas especially hard as American children face a true mental and physical health crisis.

Richard Louv coined the term *Nature Deficit Disorder* to describe the pervasive disconnect of our



modern culture to the healing benefits of nature, especially in children and marginalized populations. Fortunately, a growing body of research demonstrates that time in nature can play a vital role in redressing these difficulties.

Benefits include:

- healthier babies and mothers (especially in lower socioeconomic households)
- increased physical activity
- reduced obesity
- lower anger and aggression rates
- reduced stress
- improved relationship skills
- improved academic performance
- reduced ADHD symptoms
- increased focus and attention
- more impulse control
- less disruptive behavior
- greater engagement in learning
- improved critical thinking
- STEM and STEAM learning

All of these benefits, including countless more critical, life-coping skills associated with nature immersion and free play, can make a profound difference in an area like eastern Kentucky, plagued by poverty and reduced access to quality programs and education. Giving children some power over their own lives, by reducing stress and increasing healthy minds, bodies, and hearts, can have lasting, powerful changes.



What We Need

Just like our Mighty Acorns pre-school students, we are new to this realm, but we are ready and eager to explore, learn, build, and grow. We

have big plans and bold visions. With each new program we pilot, we are more committed than ever to implement better infrastructure, innovative programming, and leadership in the forest

school movement, and to maintain our own curiosity and wonder, as inspired by our students and community. Our flagship programs and infrastructure require initial investments to grow.



Nature and Arts Center



Taking Flight



Mighty Acorns



Taking Root



Wetlands Restoration and Site Improvements





Nature and Arts Center

\$200,000

At Red Oaks, we hope to bring together the immeasurable value of time spent in nature and the endless possibilities of artistic expression. Children need spaces that are free of timelines, agendas, and externally imposed goals. They (and we!) need the freedom to explore, wonder, create, and cultivate joy. Red Oaks hopes to provide a place of inspiration, a place in which to generate community and stewardship, and a place in which families can temporarily let go of the pressures of modern life.

Our Nature and Arts Center embodies our mission to foster a deep love of place and deep commitment to greater well-being for all. The design of our center will pay homage to the old barns that dot the Kentucky landscape but will incorporate innovative technologies to promote sustainable building in the area.

This space would allow us to offer several new opportunities to the local community. It will allow us to:

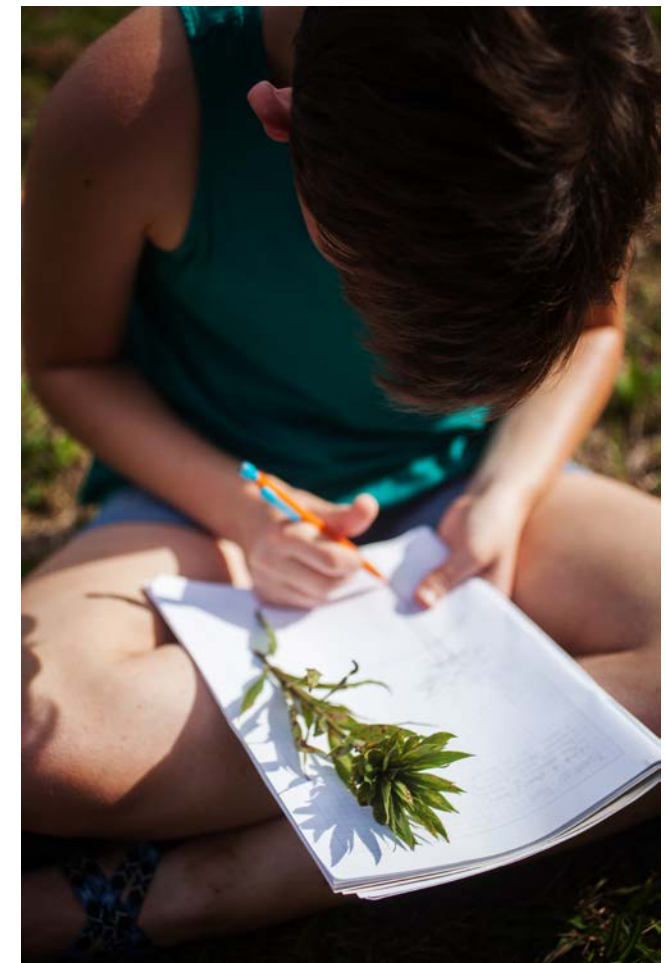
- Provide additional educational experiences using microscopes and other tools and explorations best kept indoors.
- Provide a safe haven for our staff and students

in the event of severe weather.

- Host workshops for local businesses, community members, and local government to promote teamwork and collaborate to improve access to nature for Kentucky's people.
- Offer programs for adults and teachers on a variety of nature- and art-related topics.
- Host an artist in residence and give this eastern Kentucky space a chance to be a part of the rich cultural and arts community that is Appalachia.
- Introduce the power of nature immersion, as well as concrete tips and curricula, to local educators to help combat ADHD symptoms and to improve engagement in learning and academic performance in a fun and low-cost way.
- Provide space for interns to come and study and work summer programming with subsidized living costs.

We have already begun to implement our arts component with the completion of a successful fundraising campaign, inspired and created by the kids, to build a stage to host their many plays, inspire countless hours of creativity, and build important cooperation skills. This stage will be located near the arts center and showcase the success of the kids' ingenuity and passion.

This arts center will further help us to change the narrative of eastern Kentucky, from educationally and physically regressive to creative, bold, innovative, culturally rich, progressive, and Kentucky proud.



LISA THOMAS

BOARD PRESIDENT

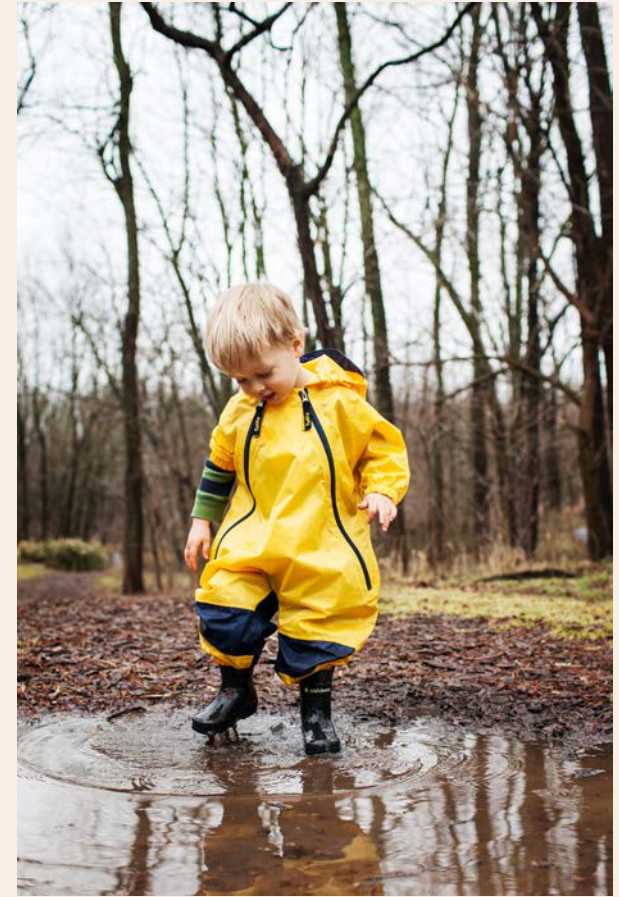
Lisa Thomas is the president of the board and has brought immeasurable value with her personal story as well as her time invested in Red Oaks. As president, she has lent her writing experience via blog posts, press releases, and editing to help us spread the word of our mission. Camping as a kid was her foundation for the love and compassion she feels for nature. This became solidified in college when she took a wilderness writing class. She shared these words with us:

“We backpacked, hiked, went canyoneering and caving, canoed, and stopped to reflect on and write about our experiences in nature. Those reflective pauses shifted something in me; they created space for me



to sink into the feelings of awe, wonder, and possibility that the natural world awakes.

“With more of life behind me now (as well as an MA in Philosophy, an MS in Counseling Psychology, and a 200-hour yoga teaching certification), I understand that such experiences of awe and wonder are at the core of human flourishing. As a mother of three boys, I see how eagerly and readily children tap into such experiences, and I strive to nourish that by immersing my kids in the natural world. In my volunteer work as a yoga teacher to teen moms in foster care, I’ve seen how children who are deprived of these experiences crave them. Discovering Red Oaks has felt like coming home. Red Oaks brings together my greatest passions – people, nature, learning, and movement – and it aims to do so not only for my kids, but also for kids who might otherwise never have those opportunities.”



Hannah Harris

DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION

Hannah grew up in a family of painters, writers, and biologists, so pairing the arts and sciences has always made perfect sense to her. In college, she studied metal sculpture right alongside biology and psychology, and then went on to get a Master's degree in Conservation Biology and Sustainable Development. She first fell in love with the mountains of eastern Kentucky when she moved here to study the recolonizing black bears as part of her Ph.D. research at the University of Kentucky. Since completing her degree, she has worked as an educator and freelance author, writing articles demystifying science and technology. From art to activism, her parents raised her to believe that everyone has the ability to make a positive and meaningful impact on their world. That's an important lesson she



tries to share with both her own children and her students. She knows firsthand the impact kids can make; she has been involved in animal rescue and wildlife rehab since she was a teenager and helped to start a nonprofit that still exists today. She has volunteered as a wilderness search and rescue canine handler and first responder, and spent the last decade coordinating with animal welfare groups to help municipal shelters in eastern Kentucky. Her experience working with at-risk youth includes being a long-time volunteer with Big Brothers/Big Sisters and she has taught at levels ranging from early elementary to college.

“To be granted so much time in a child’s world is a wondrous privilege, connecting us with the young children we once were and the future we are trying to build. I am deeply grateful for all the families who value nature immersion so much and trust us enough to take a chance on each new program.”

Mighty Acorns

\$32,600/year

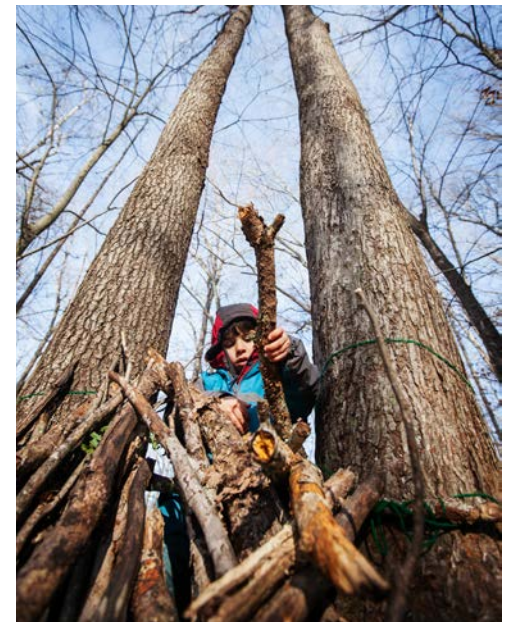
MightyAcorns is the culmination of everything we love about nature immersion. It gets preschool-age kids outside, exploring, wondering, caring, and sharing. Our program has a high social-emotional learning component that teaches kids the beauty and benefits of working together to care for each other and our world. The skills they learn are boundless and the impact is long-lasting. The ages of 3-6 are critical in the formation of a person's personality, which makes it an ideal time to nourish a child's connection with the natural world. Children this young do not always stop to think about or articulate the benefits of time

spent in nature, but they feel and experience those benefits keenly. This foundation can set the course for strong, resilient, confident, engaged, compassionate people – for future leaders.

A recent study, “Measuring connectedness to nature in preschool children in an urban setting and its relation to psychological functioning” (*PLOS ONE*, 2018), found that parents with children who had a closer connection with nature had less distress, less hyperactivity, and fewer behavioral and emotional difficulties, and improved pro-social behavior. In addition, kids

who took responsibility for nature had better peer relationships. More and more studies like this one are confirming the countless benefits already seen during the course of our program.

To build on the success of our current program, we have recently set out to offer this programming to a local Head Start preschool in our home county. We aim to secure the funding needed to implement this program and serve this local youth population that is struggling to meet school-readiness standards and lives under the extreme daily stress of poverty.





Dave Westneat

PROJECT PARTNER

Dave was interested in critters the moment he could walk and started bird watching when he was 11, while attending a summer camp where bird-banding was done. He graduated from Carleton College, got his Ph.D. from UNC-Chapel Hill, and spent three great years at Cornell before starting his current job at the University of Kentucky. Dave's research interests in birds began with how paternity affects parental behavior and focused on extra-pair paternity for 20+ years. But as students and postdocs have piqued his curiosity about other things, such as status-signaling and personality, his own research interests have evolved. Currently he is focusing on plasticity and personality in parental behavior of birds. Dave has published countless peer-reviewed journal articles and his most recent book, *Evolutionary Behavioral Ecology*, is a testament to the expertise and passion he has to share with Red Oaks students.

"Taking Flight takes me back to my youth and offers me a chance to pay the experience I had forward to a new generation. I am also really curious about the biology of birds in general and cardinals in particular, and the fact the students are also enthusiastically curious is exciting!"



Taking Flight

\$33,150/year

The Taking Flight program blends original scientific research on a native bird with active learning about science across all ages. Taking Flight is a collaboration between the University of Kentucky's Ecological Research and Education Center and its director, Dr. David Westneat, and the Red Oaks Forest School. Our ambition is that we will collect enough original data to address questions of interest to the scientific community and, along the way, introduce students to multiple elements of the process of doing creative science. It is fun, education, and science wrapped up together!

In our first year pilot study, the kids had many opportunities to get up close to wildlife and after every session we had an 'I Wonder' time. Every time



they came up with a bevy of questions, for example:

I wonder,...

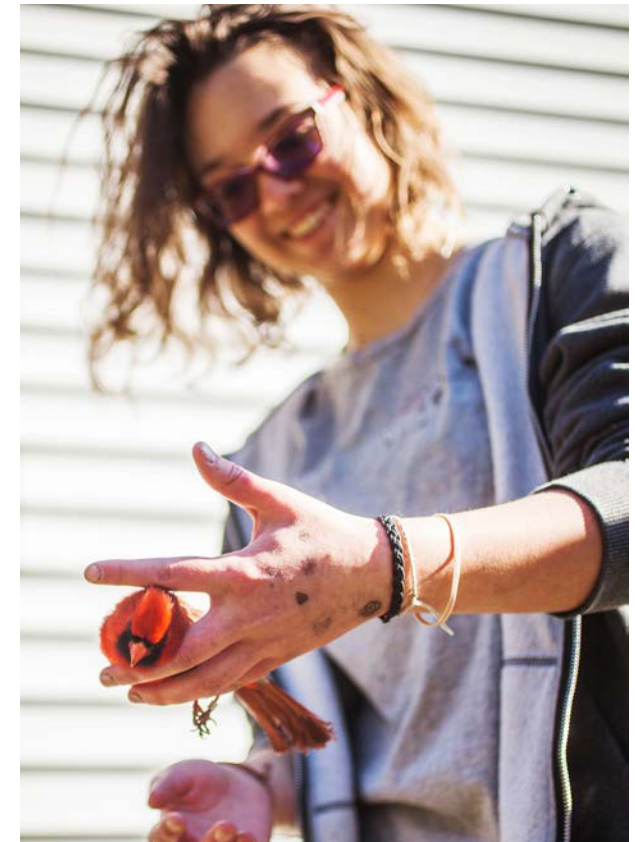
...where do they live and what food do they like best?

...will human activity affect how many birds we trap?

...how does the topography affect how many birds get trapped?

...why do some get caught more than others?

...how many cardinals are there in the whole world!?



Each session sparked so much curiosity, but also created abundant joy. Their faces lit up with each bird we caught and released.

We aim to continue to find sources of funding through granting agencies that are interested in providing kids with opportunities for STEAM, STEM, and direct wildlife interactions, which leave lasting impressions for all who encounter these magnificent creatures. We hope to expand this program to include summer camps for underserved urban youth in the immediate vicinity of the research station.

Channing Richardson

PROJECT PARTNER

A science teacher at Maysville Community and Technical College, Channing Richardson has a Master's Degree in Botany from Oklahoma State University, where he studied the effects of various disturbance regimes on plant communities. He has conducted botanical surveys in Oklahoma, Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, and Maine and plays an integral part of Red Oaks' Bioblitz, where students team up with regional biologists and experts to gather, record, and inventory the life on our campus, from moss to frogs to ferns and fish.

When he's not teaching, Channing and his wife, Amy, run Forgotten Foods Farm, a USDA-certified organic farm in eastern Kentucky. The farm was handed down to them from Channing's father and has been in his family for six generations. Channing and Amy are excited to reignite a family farming tradition and shape their farm to sustainably grow healthy foods.

The Richardsons also host a variety of educational events, both on their farm and regionally. Events range from workshops on cultivating pawpaws and inoculating logs for growing shiitake mushrooms to local foraging hikes in search of fungi and other edible plants.

"We always dreamed of starting an organic farm. The more we saw how little most kids knew about the way food grows or where it comes from, the more we wanted to move our own kids to the farm and reconnect with our roots. Finding Red Oaks fulfilled another part of our mission – to share our love for sustainably growing food with more families and to



spread knowledge about how permaculture and agroforestry practices can benefit all of us. We are excited to help Red Oaks with their mission and to help more children grow up with a knowledge and respect for nature."

Taking Root

\$15,000/year

Red Oaks' Taking Root initiative is all about pride in place and will focus on the many strengths of the local environment of eastern Kentucky. We will construct a series of five small gardens that highlight five different habitat types that occur at our site – Meadow, Riparian Corridor, Woodland, Wetland, and Crag – and highlight agroforestry projects that can occur in each. Participants will learn what makes the five habitats unique, as well as how to collect and analyze data, and will deepen their understanding of the biological and physiological processes that operate within each system and how they relate to one another. Students will discover where any problems exist and work with facilitators to attempt remediation. As the land grows healthier, so too will our participants – building new skills and gaining confidence while engaged in place-based stewardship.

Each garden site will be planted with native species, as well as noninvasive food plants, using permaculture principles. These garden sites will be created and maintained by students at Red Oaks with assistance from teachers and project partner Forgotten Foods Farm. Each garden will be equipped with monitoring devices capable of recording a variety of site-specific data, from soil and ambient temperature to wind speed and rainfall. Animal visitation will also be monitored with trail cameras and track traps set up and

monitored by students. Students will compare data they have collected from among the sites and share their findings on the Red Oaks website and with relevant citizen science groups. Produce from the sites will be sold to raise revenue to make this project self-sustaining. Students will gain valuable experience in the entire agroforestry process from site preparation to marketing and sales.

This project will enable Red Oaks to create nature-based curricula that utilize these habitat gardens and promote greater understanding of environmental concepts through a multidisciplinary approach and will share this hands-on learning with a variety of additional audiences including classes for homeschool students, public workshops for families and school groups, and resources for teachers and educators.





Wetlands Restoration and Site Improvements

\$27,250

Our unique campus is home to many ecotypes, providing many habitats for the wonderful biodiversity found there. We have a small wetland area that is home to hundreds, if not thousands, of individual amphibians, which, as a class of animals, are on the decline worldwide. We have a unique opportunity to preserve this safe haven through site modifications that will help protect these fragile plants and animals. Our wetland also helps to filter the water, keeping it clean. This not only helps with the water quality, which is important to wildlife, but keeps the creek water safe for our kids to play in. Wetlands help mitigate flooding by holding the water in place, which helps keep infrastructure, like the parking lot and trails, in good condition.

We need to stabilize this system to provide good access to wildlife viewing and exploring for our kids while also protecting critical habitat for all the wildlife that use it. We also need to prevent further stream erosion for the protection of our kids and the site, which will require some heavy rock moving. We would love to put in some kiosks for easy access to tools and books to aid learning and exploration. We will also put in two composting toilets to have clean, efficient, and environmentally friendly ways to dispose of waste.



H&S Lumber

INVESTOR

H&S Lumber owners Laurie and Tom DiFilippo are leaders in the renewable resource industry in Kentucky. They believe in working to provide a top quality product and great employment opportunities and in supporting their community. They know that raising up kids in the outdoors will ensure a future of people who care about the environment, foster a good work ethic and confidence, and establish a love of this place. Tom and Laurie want to see the people of eastern Kentucky stay here in their home region with a strong connection to the land and

a love of Appalachia, like they have. They know that Red Oaks Forest School will instill the qualities needed for future generations to meet this need.

“We both grew up loving and respecting the outdoors. We raised both of our daughters to do the same, and they have done a great job teaching their children to do so as well. We take great pride in supporting the young people in this community, either through the public school system or through programs such as Red Oaks Forest School. We were so excited to hear about the Red Oaks program and their mission. Our youth are going to be our future. Through exploration and daily activity in an outdoor environment, we see children’s confidence grow. We see leadership and healthy relationships with their peers. Our hope is that through our support, the future leaders in this rural community will be more equipped, better educated, and driven to make a difference in the world we live in.”

—Laurie

“We are very proud to be a part of an industry that produces a product from a renewable and natural resource. Protecting the environment is extremely important to us as a family and as a business. The product we produce is both biodegradable and recyclable.”

—Tom



Rockhouse

INVESTOR

At the Rockhouse, Aaron Brouwer believes in supporting community by using a host of local farmers to provide a quality farm-to-fork experience. He has taken this support a step further by donating 10% of all profits to Red Oaks Forest School. He believes that nonprofits should spend more time doing their hard and good work, and less time fundraising. As a lifelong rock climber who grew up climbing trees, he sees a direct correlation between confidence and a strong work ethic in adulthood and the freedom to test one's limits in nature during childhood. He believes that the freedom to play in nature has immeasurable value for our children and our future.



"It seems that a lack of nature and getting outside is one of the things missing in this modern world. Red Oaks helps establish this connection

early, and I believe, gives the children a foundation to grow from, and a love they'll always be able to return to."

Benefits



NATURE AND ARTS CENTER

- Educational workshops
- Teacher training
- Arts classes
- Community engagement hub
- Safe haven for nature immersion classes in inclement weather
- Music workshops and events
- Team-building workshops
- Art exhibits
- Artists in residence
- Participation in the rich arts community of Appalachia
- Stimulus for creativity
- Rest area for mothers with infants while kids are enjoying other programming
- Opportunity for artistic expression
- Bolsters courage from sharing and performing
- Fosters a love of the arts



MIGHTY ACORNS

- Social-emotional development
- Fosters teamwork and cooperation
- Promotes executive function
- Free play in nature
- Bolsters creativity
- Nurtures wonder
- Develops confidence
- Builds fine and gross motor skills
- Improves school readiness
- Combats anxiety and ADHD symptoms
- Improves physical well-being and combats obesity
- Builds compassion for nature and each other

TAKING FLIGHT

- Promotes partnership with universities and nonprofits
- Exposes students to real science in action
- Offers child-led, inquiry-based science to promote focus, executive function, and critical thinking
- Provides STEM and STEAM learning opportunities
- Long term goals include access to local underserved urban kids for summer camp and all kids year-round
- Community driven partnership for unique citizen science opportunities
- Sparks curiosity
- Increases compassion for wildlife
- Promotes social and emotional development
- Direct wildlife interactions make powerful, lasting impressions



TAKING ROOT

- Encourages pride in place by highlighting ecological richness and opportunities available in eastern Kentucky
- Investment in long-term sustainability of Red Oaks site
- Enriches educational opportunities of existing programs
- Builds marketable skills in agroforestry
- Multidisciplinary approach to biological and agricultural education
- Entrepreneurial experience for students, especially those living in underserved areas
- Promotes critical thinking and problem solving
- Provides experience with data analysis
- Builds confidence and teamwork skills

WETLAND RESTORATION AND SITE IMPROVEMENT

- Increase wildlife habitat
- Stopover for bird migration
- Provide opportunities for kids to discover the rich biodiversity that multiple ecotypes afford
- Increase biodiversity
- Help keep water clean
- Mitigate flooding and erosion damage
- STEM learning opportunities
- Increase engagement and learning potential by offering more wildlife interactions
- Provide safe waste disposal
- Bolster infrastructure to protect investment in the land





I wish for a clearer mind

I wish for a clearer mind

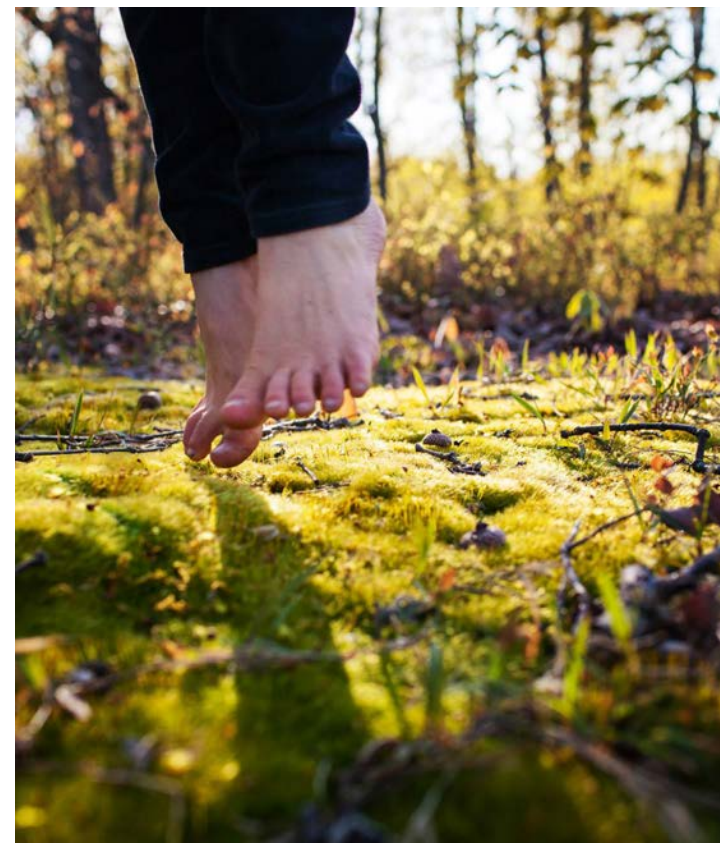
I wish for a clearer mind

When my daughter was young, we ventured into the Red River Gorge one day with some friends. Ayla, who is always barefoot, ran ahead and was stopped in her tracks by a soft, emerald green carpet of moss. She was a ball of excitement and begged me to take off my shoes to feel it, too. Despite my grown-up irritations of untying my boots, my feet being cold, our friends waiting for us, and our just needing to get there; I couldn't say no to her pleas. I will never forget the joy



on her face as she watched me step onto the moss. She could tell I felt it, too. She was right. It was a delight of the senses, a stopped-time moment of joy and connection between us. I thought I was out there, with all my knowledge, teaching her about what nature is, but she was teaching me what this time in nature is really about. The bond we shared, making that journey, was the most important thing. These types of bonds establish trust, help break down our walls, and get us grounded in who we are and who we want to become. This simple outing changed the course of my life. It was later that year that we started Red Oaks Forest School.

Just one example of the impact this program has had on our community involves our wish tree. We picked a tree and gave the kids a chance to share bravely what was in their hearts and on their minds by writing their wishes on pieces of fabric, which we then used to decorate the tree. One of the teens in our program, who struggles with anxiety, shared the most beautiful and vulnerable bits of herself on the wish tree: *I wish for a clearer mind and I wish for the end of suffering*. She also shared these words: "Taking care of kids has really helped. They see you as an important person and then you start to see that in yourself." My jaw dropped when I heard these



words come out of her mouth. It is one thing to know that these big moments are happening for them, but to have her articulate that confidence and self-worth filled me with so much hope.

The research supports these personal experiences, as well as that pivotal moment with my daughter on the trail; that simply placing your bare feet on the ground can be the first step to happier, healthier minds, bodies, and hearts.

—Tina

We need your help.

Kentucky needs a nature immersion reboot! Kentucky is home to some of the most diverse, beautiful, and incredible outdoor opportunities, including paddling, hiking, world-class rock climbing, wildlife viewing, fishing, millions of trees to climb and countless cliff-top vistas. We have the space, but we need the value of spending time in nature back in

our hearts and minds. We need to view it as essential for our physical and mental health, because it is. Kentucky is leading the nation in obesity and among children the statistics are staggering. The commonwealth is ranked third in the country for obesity according to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The formative years of early childhood must include



free time in nature. And yet, too often, this is the missing link in childhood development. Red Oaks uses nature immersion to foster exploration and wonder as we root ourselves in compassion and community. We need to change the narrative the United States uses to talk about Kentucky and continue our efforts to be a leader in progressive and alternative education. All children need access to free play in nature and to experience the physical and mental health benefits of nature immersion in their daily lives.

With your support, Red Oaks is willing and able to take on this mission and provide meaningful programming, content, and leadership in this international movement to get people back into nature.





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