Nature Connect

Winter/Spring 2023

For Special Friends & Donors of Riverbend Environmental Education Center
Dear Riverbend Supporters,

As the pandemic recedes, Riverbend is reflecting on two years of abundant, communal resilience, with supporters like you showing up for local schools in need. The COVID-19 pandemic placed unprecedented strain on our friends and partners in the American education system, and low-income children suffered the worst educational losses. Riverbend’s pandemic story is a case study in how things grow back, and what happens when dedicated, passionate people commit to care for the earth and our children – ALL children – no matter their zip code.

As Riverbend’s leaders, we are deeply grateful to YOU: the donors, volunteers, Board Directors, staff, and teachers named within this newsletter. Your generosity directly powered the rebuild of our award-winning, in-person environmental education programs at lightning speed when schools finally reopened their doors in March 2021, to educational partners like Riverbend.

Riverbend is once again Montgomery County’s #1 provider of environmental education for children, and a model STEM teaching partner for schools in the greater Philadelphia region.

In the last 12 months, thanks to your involvement, Riverbend grew from teaching 700 children in-person in 2021 to teaching 6,709 children in-person in 2022, delivering nature lessons and outdoor experiences led by our trained Environmental Educators.

It was glorious to see the first yellow school buses roll down Spring Mill Road full of elementary school students on their first field trips to Riverbend in nearly two years. For many of our students, a trip to Riverbend marks their first time walking in a stream, catching a toad, or stepping into a greenhouse.

Our conviction is that children need to know about the natural systems that sustain all life on earth, and about how to protect those systems. For their mental and emotional health, they also deserve guidance on how to form their own intimate relationship with Mother Earth, and a joyful beginning to a lifelong habit of spending time in nature.

This report overflows with stories of things growing back, from our reopened Aquaponics Greenhouse to our festive lineup of weekend events for families, adult educational offerings, and relaxing evening gatherings for adults and families at our 30-acre Gladwyne preserve.

Thanks to YOU - Riverbend is flourishing once again.

But the work is unfinished. In 2023, we will invite you to help us carry out Earth Action projects in Philly schools, restore trail signage on our serene walking paths, and expand nature access by introducing summer camp scholarships. And, approaching our 50th anniversary in 2024, we invite you to help us spend this year envisioning Riverbend’s next five decades of environmental education.

With the world moving so fast, how do we stay grounded to the things that matter most? Riverbend keeps us connected to our first teacher: Mother Earth. We strive to ensure every visitor falls in love with the natural environment, and leaves Riverbend inspired to take action to protect its delicate and interconnected systems – the very systems that sustain us all.

With gratitude,

Erin Reilly
Executive Director

Bryan Franey
Chair, Board of Directors
Support for Science Teachers

Classroom teachers know that hands-on projects conducted outdoors increase student’s interest in science. To prepare students to address timely environmental issues and succeed in STEM-based careers, strong partnerships between informal (nonprofits) and formal (schools) education institutions are key.

This school year, Riverbend is working with 10 classrooms enrolled in our free, year-long Community of Practice. This grant-funded program coaches teachers on how to teach science curriculum outdoors. After only three days training with Riverbend at the program’s 2022 kickoff event - our Summer Inquiry Institute - public school teachers were already reporting an increase of up to 70% in their confidence and knowledge of outdoor STEM instruction.

Riverbend has been investing in classroom teachers as valued and respected partners in nature education for nearly a decade.

Right: Riverbend’s EE Fellow, Chris Sosnowski, works with students at Stonehurst Hills Elementary School in Upper Darby.

Below: Education Specialist, Jill Shashaty, leads a group of educators in an introductory outdoor session at the John James Audubon Center at Mill Grove.

Benefits to Students

After doing an Earth Action project: “I hear kids being very outspoken about litter. They point the drain and say ‘It’s gonna go down there! It’s gonna go into our watershed’. I think about how I didn’t have this information as a kid. And it makes me think how much better could the earth be? This whole experience was amazing. I learned so much.”

-Community of Practice Teacher Kristin Kelly, 1st - 5th grade at Rhodes Elementary

Community of Practice Teacher Kelly Kolesnik’s 1st grade students from Keystone Charter Academy sharing their signs to help curb litter in their schoolyard.
Riverbend Environmental Education Center made a positive impact in Upper Darby and Norristown School Districts in 2022, reaching all 4th graders in both districts, making multiple visits to each class, and taking students outdoors to investigate the natural habitats on their schoolyards.

In an effort to further connect children and teachers to nature in their own neighborhoods, Riverbend environmental educators led guided field trips for all classes to their nearest nature preserve – Heinz Wildlife Refuge and Norristown Farm Park. Students lifted up rocks to find salamanders, traversed streams, and fed native fish. Teachers praised the hands-on, immersive nature of the program.

As we look ahead to the 2023-24 school year, Riverbend will continue teaching Upper Darby’s 4th grade and will double the number of Norristown students by serving two grades, reaching an estimated 2,000 students next school year to enhance their understanding of the natural world. As federally designated Title I districts, the districts enroll a majority low-income student body, and this program was provided for free to all Upper Darby and Norristown 4th grade students thanks to Riverbend’s generous donors. Riverbend dedicates 50% of its school year education programming to low-income students.

Benefits to Students

“I received great feedback with lots of academic details about them from the students. The visit [from a Riverbend educator] was an eye opener for many of the students. Seeing their school yard as an ecosystem made them really think!”

- Upper Darby 4th grade teacher
We’re back! 2022 in Review

The Past Year Was a Time of Renewal and Growth at the Preserve and Beyond

Riverbend is proud to report we added a second location for summer camp, partnering with McKaig Nature Center to provide a fun and educational experience for children at McKaig’s pristine 91-acre woods in King of Prussia. The goal of the camp is to give children a deeper understanding of the environment and the importance of conservation.

In 2023, Summer Camp at both Riverbend’s Gladwyne preserve and McKaig’s King of Prussia preserve will be led by Riverbend’s skilled educators who guide campers in nature exploration through hikes, stream-stomping, bug-catching, and adventure.

Events are back at Riverbend including beloved community favorite Shiverfest.
Welcome New Board Directors

Five New Directors Join Riverbend's Board in 2022

Dr. Sean Gardiner
Dr. Sean Gardiner has been a leader in the field of STEM Education in the greater Philadelphia area for over 13 years. Working with teachers, administrators, School Districts, and local community partners, Dr. Gardiner has led a variety of initiatives aimed at transforming the STEM landscape in K-12 educational spaces. A primary focus of his work has been addressing systems that have perpetuated the systemic underrepresentation of students from the BIPOC community in STEM careers. Dr. Gardiner earned his Master’s degree in Communication Sciences from the University of Connecticut and his Doctorate in Educational Leadership from Widener University. He is currently the Director of Curriculum and Instruction for STEM Education in the Upper Merion Area School District.

To Dr. Gardiner, Riverbend’s mission captures the essence of STEM education and the importance of children learning through meaningful outdoor experiences. At the heart of the mission is the central tenet of equity, which encompasses everything Dr. Gardiner and his school district do to ensure all students have an opportunity to learn, engage, and excel.

Dr. Gardiner connected with Riverbend over eight years ago by engaging in a partnership leveraging outdoor education and Aquaponics. Over the past eight years, his district has had over 2,800 students visit Riverbend. In the Upper Merion Area Middle School, students engage in hands-on learning throughout the school year by using 27 classroom Aquaponics systems installed by Riverbend experts. This partnership has brought shared local, state, and national recognition with Riverbend.

Sarah Greenstein
Sarah is a Senior Customer Strategy Manager at Johnson & Johnson Consumer Healthcare focused on Skin Health. She has been part of J&J for the past 18 years, starting in Supply Chain and moving into various Sales roles throughout her career.

Sarah values Riverbend’s mission to bring environmental awareness and principles to children across the region. She believes that the hands-on opportunity Riverbend provides through programs, field trips, and summer camps, encourages children and provides the opportunity to become aware of their impact on the environment around them.

Sarah first connected with Riverbend in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic when her two boys attended the on-site virtual learning program. During the virtual learning center days, Sarah’s sons grew to love the preserve. As a result, the family came to Riverbend for hikes and enjoyed family activities such as the virtual scavenger hunt, ShiverQuest.

Clay Hall
Clay Hall is a Portfolio Manager at Conservest Capital Advisors, a boutique wealth management firm based in Wynnewood. He is a CFA charterholder and member of the firm’s investment committee.

Clay believes that through its mission, Riverbend is helping to develop and improve environmental conservation practices for children and families in the region.

First introduced to Riverbend through Leadership Philadelphia, Clay appreciates Riverbend’s beautiful nature preserves and believes that it should be maintained and enhanced for current and future generations to enjoy and appreciate.

In 2022, Clay and his fellow Leadership Philadelphia Junto Number 5 group members helped Riverbend build new propagation beds on the preserve. They donated all of the necessary materials and supplied the needed volunteer person power to install them in place. Learn more in the sidebar on the next page.

Dr. Tracy Sainvil-Joslyn
Dr. Tracy Sainvil-Joslyn has 20 years of educational experience and has centered her focus and research on Educator Effectiveness and Evaluation and Nature-Based Science via Meaningful Watershed Educational Experiences (MWEE). In her spare time, Dr. Sainvil-Joslyn indulges in writing, cooking, meditating, laughing, and remembering how valuable it is to have time with her family.

Dr. Sainvil-Joslyn feels that Riverbend’s mission speaks to the core of her educational philosophy. She believes we must empower children and adults to take action, specifically to conserve Earth’s resources. This is how we can preserve what came before us. Her first experience with Riverbend was in the summer of 2018 when she participated in Philadelphia Children Access Nature (PCAN) and the Summer Science Inquiry Institute. Through the years, Tracy has been honored to see and support the growth and development of this program through active participation in Riverbend’s Nature-Based STEM Community of Practice.

Participating in the Summer Science Inquiry Institute and the Nature-Based STEM Community of Practice has empowered Dr. Sainvil-Joslyn to continue learning and advocating for environmental learning in our K-8 public schools. Nature has been such a source of healing for her, both professionally and personally. She feels that her work with Riverbend has broadened her leadership capacity in Science education and has helped her make authentic relationships with other advocates and educators of nature-based science.

Mike Werner
Mike has over 20 years of work experience in a variety of industries. Most recently, he has worked locally at Tandigm Health as the Vice President of Business Transformation. In that role, Mike works on developing and implementing their business strategy. Educationally, Mike has a BS in Finance from Villanova University and an MBA from the University of Notre Dame.

Mike has a fond memory of chaperoning a field trip with his children several years ago and remembers being impressed by the day’s program and the area’s beauty. When it comes to Riverbend’s mission, he feels that Riverbend’s commitment to educating children in the local and surrounding communities resonates with him the most.

Board Directors Blaze the Trail

In 2022, Riverbend’s Board of Directors set a bold course for the near future, completing both a 3-year Strategic Plan and Riverbend’s first-ever DEI plan. As environmental educators, we know that natural environments with greater biodiversity are stronger and more resilient. In turn, we aspire to be an ever more diverse, inclusive, and equitable organization. We commit to building a community where both our staff members and the students, educators, and families we serve, feel valued, respected, and engaged. The full DEI Plan and Strategic Plan can be found on Riverbend’s website.

Riverbend also expresses its immense gratitude to outgoing Board Directors Angela Allen, Dave Copas, Ellen Jordan, and Keith Pryor, whose terms ended in the last year. These dedicated leaders, and their fellow Board Directors, took an active role in crafting programming and strategy, and brought new resources and people to the team effort of sustaining Riverbend’s critical mission.

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Financial Report 2021 & 2022

2021 and 2022 Expenses

Property & Equipment ................................ $1,631,060
Year Ended December 31, 2022

In 2021.

*Riverbend also received $144,380 in Federal PPP grants.

2022 Expenses

Total Expenses ...................................................... $953,261

Gifts in Honor

In Honor of Laurie Bachman Peter Grove
In Honor of Brucie and Ed Baumstein Lisa Hancock
In Honor of Tasha Childs Julie Schwartz
In Honor of Danielle Curley Kellie Bracconier
In Honor of Ellen Jordan and Gretchen Cooney Eleanor Miller
In Honor of Ellen Jordan Annabelle Irey
In Honor of Caroline Siegfried Jane Siegfried
In Honor of Peihong Tang Guochun Xie
In Honor of Barney VanClief Diane Reilly

Gifts in Memory

In Memory of Clemens Lazenka Elizabeth Lazenka
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In Memory of the mother of Rory McNeil Michael Haines
In Memory of Erika Miller Jennie Roach

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In Memory of Peggy Rhoades Michael Haines

In Memory of Adam Sawoski Joan Sawoski

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Jonathan Stump

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Lisa and Jeffrey Thomas

Mr. and Mrs. James M. Turkett

The Wellesley School

Dir. Tamara Davis and Bruce Wightman

Lisa and Lars Williamson

Guochun Xie and Peggy Tang

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Donors

Jody Seibert

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$1,000 to $2,499

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The Alex E. Fed Foundation

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Lisa and Jeffrey Thomas

Mr. and Mrs. James M. Turkett

The Wellesley School

Dir. Tamara Davis and Bruce Wightman

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Angela Allevi and Jason Newman

Kristin and Peter Reissler

Patrick Ryan

Riverbend deeply appreciates all donations. Gifts under $50 are acknowledged on our website.
The past year saw a return to an active public event schedule at Riverbend including our largest community gathering, Shiverfest.

In 2023, we have a full schedule of educational and family-friendly events including, Toddle Transformation and a Family Bird Walk in April, our Spring Adopt-a-Tree Treeplanting day and Farm to Table gala in May, and Summer Solstice celebration in June.

Head to our website, riverbenddec.org, to see Riverbend's full event schedule for 2023.
| 38 | teachers received professional development in nature-based STEM learning from Riverbend. |
| 389 | lessons taught in classrooms by our environmental educators. |
| 256 | volunteers helped us maintain the native species on the preserve. |
| 6,709 | students engaged through our school programs and nature camps. |
| 1,400 | people welcomed to the preserve at 9 public events. |
| 214 | trees planted. Made possible by a TreeVitalize Watershed Grant managed by PHS with funds from PA DEP and Aqua. |
| 585 | Shiverfest tickets sold for our first year back since 2019. |
| 68% | of our program visits benefited at low-income students. |
| 365 | days a year that our preserve remained open to the public. |