

The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World

P.O. Box 41108, Greensboro, NC 27404

www.beholdnature.org ~ beholdnature@aol.com

Special Design Programs

Background

The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World conducts most of its programs for children, adolescents and adults at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary, a 165 acre earth sanctuary in Whitsett, NC. The earth sanctuary is a unique place of beauty with wildflower meadows, five miles of gentle woodland trails, small streams and twin lakes. It is a setting where the presence of the natural world can be fully experienced.

Since 2000, the Center has offered day programs for schoolchildren at the earth sanctuary. These programs offer a one-time experience for children where they begin to make a deep, personal connection to the natural world. Beginning in 2004, we have extended this experience into ongoing partnerships that can bring the rhythms of the natural world more deeply into the lives of children.

The Center welcomes inquiries from teachers and schools, pre-school through college, as well as from other organizations with children and young adults in their care. We offer many possibilities to partner with the Center.

Collaborative Process

Our Special Design programs begin with an exploratory conversation between Center staff and a representative of the school or organization. When we sit down together to explore possibilities for a Special Design program, we engage in a conversation about where a possible collaboration might take us. What are the values of the learning community or organization? How might the child-nature reunion be nurtured there? How can we provide continuity of experience for the children or young adults so that their connection to the natural world deepens over time? Might there be interest in a staff retreat as a foundation for the partnership going forward? These are some of the questions that open up possibilities.

This first exploratory meeting is given freely by the staff of the Center. If there is interest in moving forward with a Special Design Program, we create a program proposal, based on our exploratory conversation, which includes a program design and a program budget for review. We engage in a process of revision until the program proposal is mutually beneficial. At that point, we create a contract for the program and seek to secure dates for facility rental, if needed. We are also happy to co-write grants in support of partnerships.

These partnership programs are generative and creative, like the natural world itself. Since 2004, we have created Special Design Programs with the following schools and organizations:

Antioch University New England, Keene, NH
B’Nai Shalom Day School, Greensboro, NC

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Blue Ribbon Mentor Program, Chapel Hill/Carrboro Schools, NC
Elon University, Elon, NC
Emerson Waldorf School, Chapel Hill, NC
Greensboro Day School, Greensboro, NC
Greensboro Montessori School, Greensboro, NC
Greenville Montessori School, Greenville, NC
Guilford Park Pre-School, Greensboro, NC
Holy Trinity Episcopal Church, Greensboro, NC
Jackson Middle School, Greensboro, NC
Montessori School of Winston-Salem, NC
NC State University Science Camp, Raleigh, NC
NC Zoo, Asheboro, NC
Our Lady of Grace Catholic School, Greensboro, NC
Prescott College, Prescott, AZ
Rainbow Mountain Community School, Asheville, NC
Reach for the Stars, Guilford County, NC
River Mill Academy Charter School, Saxapahaw, NC
Sacred Mountain Sanctuary, Candler, NC
Sedgefield Presbyterian Church, Sedgefield, NC
United Church, Chapel Hill, NC
University of North Carolina, Greensboro, NC
Walnut Creek Wetland Center, Raleigh, NC
Westchester Country Day School, High Point, NC
Youth Focus, Greensboro, NC

If you are interested in exploring a partnership with the Center, please contact us at beholdnature@aol.com. Fees vary according to program design.

What Kinds of Programs Have You Offered?

Faculty/Staff Retreats

When we begin to work with a learning community, we often start with a faculty/staff retreat so that the Center and the learning community can come into deeper relationship with one another and the natural world, creating a meaningful context for exploring possibilities for partnering. The following faculty/staff retreats are a few examples of this kind of program:

B’Nai Shalom Day School, Greensboro, NC

We began working with B’Nai Shalom Day School by offering a faculty/staff retreat focused on the human-earth relationship, the challenges of continuous partial attention in an increasingly technological world, the sharing of eco-stories and a collaborative process for identifying ways of working together on the creation of integral programs related to Judaism and the Natural World. This was the beginning of a 6-year partnership under grants from the Toleo Foundation.

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Greensboro Day School, Greensboro, NC

We have offered three faculty programs for the Greensboro Day School: (1) A retreat for the English Faculty on Re-Imagining Education in an Ecological Age, (2) A retreat for the Kindergarten Faculty in preparation for their class visits to Timberlake Earth Sanctuary, and (3) A 3-part series of retreats with the GDS Sustainability Committee that engaged a process of considering perspectives on the human-earth relationship with the goal of crafting a sustainability statement for the school by the end of the school year.

Greensboro Montessori School, Greensboro, NC

Preparatory to a 3-year Special Design program for the children of the their school, 22 teachers from The Greensboro Montessori School attended the Center's Seventh Generation Teachers Program, a series of three retreats exploring the human-earth relationship and the inner life of the child in nature. A smaller number of GMS teachers attended a program on Montessori's Cosmic Education, also in preparation for our Special Design work together.

Montessori School of Winston-Salem, Winston-Salem, NC

Tandem with designing an 8-acre natural area for their school, the faculty of the Montessori School of Winston-Salem requested a one-day faculty retreat focused on developing capacities to bring the children of their school into a deep relationship with the natural world. Following the retreat, faculty engaged in a daily practice of beholding and journaling. Near the end of the school year, Center staff travelled to the school to create a context within which the beholding practice could be shared.

Our Lady of Grace Catholic School, Greensboro, NC

The Center offered a one-day introductory retreat for the faculty of Our Lady of Grace Catholic School in which we engaged in ecostories, guided earth walks and envisioning a work together. We considered together the contributions of Catholic writers/visionaries like Thomas Berry, Hildegard of Bingen, St. Francis of Assisi, Teilhard de Jardin and Thomas Merton. We also considered the contemporary Catholic initiatives of Diane Pendola and Theresa Hahn (founders of the Skyline Eco-contemplative Center), Sister Miriam McGillis (founder of Genesis Farm), and Sisters Bernadette Bostwick and Gail Worcelo (founders of Green Mountain Monastery).

Rainbow Community School, Asheville, NC

The Center offered a "Nurturing a Sense of Wonder" Special Design program for teachers from The Rainbow Community School who travelled from Asheville to Timberlake Earth Sanctuary for the program.

Reach for the Stars, Greensboro, NC

The Center offered a three-part program for home daycare providers and those who oversee home daycare providers that included making a personal connection to the earth, ways of working with young children in home daycare settings and home daycare visits.

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Sacred Mountain Sanctuary (The Learning Village), Candler, NC

The Center travelled to Candler, NC, to offer a 2-day faculty/staff retreat. On the first day, we focused on The Evolution of The Learning Village, the nature of a “Living Curriculum/Living School,” and on a ritual closing for the staff inviting them to ask, “What do I want to let go of, What am I moving toward?” On the second day, we focused on the inner preparation of the teacher, rituals with children, a guided earth walk and an exploration of special design program possibilities.

Westchester Country Day School

The Center offered an afternoon retreat for the faculty of Westchester Country Day School, which opened as follows: The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural world engages in a work for educators and children amidst the beauty of a 165-acre earth sanctuary. During our afternoon together, we'll introduce you to the work of the Center, share eco-stories, take solo walks on earth sanctuary trails, and consider ways of bringing the natural world more deeply into the lives of the students at Westchester Country Day School.”

Programs for Children and Young Adults

Once we have a sense of the values and nature of a particular learning community, we work with faculty to create programs that will help bring the natural world more deeply into the curriculum in an integral manner.

The following offerings are a few examples of this kind of Special Design program for schools:

B’Nai Shalom Day School (see *Chrysalis* Spring 2006, 7-11)

Through grants from the Toleo Foundation, we were able to create Special Design programs in Judaism and the Natural World for B’Nai Shalom Day School over the course of 6 years, such as:

- ~ Sukkot (discovering brachot – blessings – in the natural world)
- ~ Tu B’Shevat (honoring trees)
- ~ Passover (hope and renewal in Spring)
- ~ Water and Earth: The First Three Days of Creation
- ~ Water: The Human as a Vessel (water as a vessel, a gift of life)
- ~ Water and Covenants (water as flow, writing mitvahs and sending them afloat in a gourd bowl)
- ~ The Poetry of Nature
- ~ A Bond of Intimacy (the web of life and interrelationships)
- ~ Dayenu (working with the Jewish Passover song about being grateful to God for all the gifts he has given the Jewish people)
- ~ Awakening to Landscape and the Power of Praise (Writing Odes)
- ~ Silence, Thoreau and a Covenant
- ~ Slow Time (an exploration of deep time and change)

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- ~ Every Day is a New Day
- ~ Growing and Changing
- ~ Circle of Life
- ~ Empathy and Interdependence (the imaginative art of becoming a communion of subjects)

Emerson Waldorf High School

We created a special design program for the graduating high school class devoted to an experiential exploration of differentiation, subjectivity and communion. Through solo time in the natural world, students considered the following seed thoughts:

- ~ We find ourselves in a universe where everything is different from every other thing.
- ~ Everything has an inside, an interior reality.
- ~ Everything is related to everything else.

The program ended with a ritual marsh bridge crossing.

Greensboro Montessori School (see *Chrysalis*, Spring 2006, 14-17)

Through in-school grants, we created Special Design Programs for the Greensboro Montessori School that were integral with Montessori's Great Lessons over the course of three years, as follows:

- ~ First Year: "Seasons" integrated with the writing process as a continuous thread
- ~ Second Year: "The Language of the Forest" integrated with the history of writing
- ~ Third Year: "Shapes of Nature" integrated with geometry

Greenville Montessori School

The Center co-created a graduation ceremony at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary for Greenville Montessori School's graduating class 2015. The day began with setting a tone for respect, deep noticing and reverence for life and for each other. Then the children's teachers spoke to them about this special time in their lives and each child completed a necklace of beads representing their past, present and future. The rhythm of the day included empathetic listening in pairs, listening with "new ears" to nature in silence, and journaling. The day ended with a ritual Marsh Bridge crossing to the sound of Native American flute.

Montessori School of Winston-Salem

Botany Through the Seasons: a three-part program for the 4th-5th grade in Autumn, Winter and Spring. In keeping with Maria Montessori's vision that children must "feel and live in harmony with the earth," this special design program brought the upper elementary students into a deep relationship with plants at the earth sanctuary through the seasons over the course of two years. The heart of the program the first year was an invitation to the students to enter two worlds: the "world of the garden" and the "world of the woods." In order to experience the wholeness of each of these places, the children

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were asked to put their scientific concepts aside and to enter into these worlds through sensory practices and inner imagining. They experienced the plant between sun and earth and amidst all that lives all around. Inner experiences found expression in writing in answer to the question, “What kind of world have you entered?” Then, the students were invited to behold one plant or tree within each world, bringing loving attention to their new plant or tree friend. These beholding experiences were then rendered in visual artistic expression. In the second year of the program, the students were invited to enter the “world of the pond” and the “world of the creek” in the same manner.

Our Lady of Grace Catholic School (see Special Design Programs for Catholic Schools)

The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World has had an ongoing relationship with Our Lady of Grace Catholic School that began with a faculty retreat in 2008. Since 2009, the 2nd, 4th and 8th grades have brought their students out once a year for one of our programs. In 2014, the 6th grade joined us for the first time and has told us that they look forward coming back every year. This kind of conscious collaboration has greatly enriched and deepened the children’s experiences in the natural world. What has emerged is a living integration of the natural world with the OLG curriculum as follows:

- ~ 2nd grade: Communion
- ~ 4th grade: Awakening to Nature
- ~ 6th grade: Empathetic Listening
- ~ 8th grade: The Poetry of Nature

Programs for Colleges and Universities

The Center welcomes partnerships with colleges and universities. The following Special Design programs are examples of college/university partnerships.

Antioch University New England

The Center has co-created a Learning Domain in “Foundations of Contemplative Ecology” with Eric McDuffie, approved as part of the second year of his PhD program in Environmental Studies at Antioch University. Center staff mentored the Learning Domain. Part 1 of the Learning Domain was devoted to the philosophical foundations of contemplative ecology through a close reading of the published work of Andreas Weber, Thomas Berry, David Abram, Douglas Christie, Robert Sardello and Arthur Zajonc. Part 2 of the Learning Domain was devoted to an apprenticeship in the eco-contemplative practices of the Center.

Elon University

The Center served as a context for a day program for Anthony Weston’s Environmental Visions class over many years that included an introduction to the Center’s work, solos in the natural world, and time for sharing at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary.

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Prescott College

Center staff mentored several courses for a Prescott College student working on her BA, including a course on Carl Jung, a course on the Ethnography of Conversation, and a course on A Sense of the Sacred in Education including Montessori's cosmic education, Steiner's phenomenology and earth literacy at the Ridge and Valley Charter School in rural New Jersey. The last two courses culminated in articles that were published in the Center's journal *Chrysalis* and subsequently published in the Center's publication, *Only the Sacred: Transforming Education in the Twenty-first Century*.

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro

The Center worked with Valerie Vickers at UNCG to create a program for 25 in-service teachers that introduced them to the work of Thomas Berry and the Center's practices and ways of working with children. The day also included ways to introduce the natural world in the classroom.

Programs for Churches

The Center has also partnered with churches to create Special Design programs for all ages, for example:

Holy Trinity Episcopal Church Summer Bible School.

In a co-creation with Anne-Barton Carter, the Center worked with Philip Newell's *The Book of Creation* to create a Special Design Program for 4-6th graders attending Holy Trinity's Summer Bible School. We created a three-day program as follows:

- ~ Tuesday: The Fecundity of God – "The earth is full of goodness"
- ~ Wednesday: The Harmony of God – "You give birth to the lights of the skies"
- ~ Thursday: The Creatureliness of God – "Ask the creatures, they will tell you"

United Church of Chapel Hill

The Center worked with Susan Steinberg at The United Church of Chapel Hill to create a special design program, "In Wonder and Awe of God's Creation." The program included a talk at the church to prepare the congregation for a Sunday afternoon program at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary. We began by singing "All things bright and beautiful" in the opening circle and introduced practices for earthwalks that brought us into presence and deep noticing of ourselves as part of a communion of subjects. At the end of the earthwalk we invited the group to write and draw how they felt and saw God's creation during the earthwalk. The day ended with the Eucharist.

Conclusion

The Center's Special Design programs are a wonderful interplay between the mission of the Center and the mission of an organization. Through deep listening and reciprocity, programs are born that meet the unique needs of a wide range of organizations that recognize the deep value of cultivating the human-earth relationship in their work.