2018

Hands of the Future, Inc.: Connecting Children to Nature

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Recommended Citation

Busse, Rebecca (2018) "Hands of the Future, Inc.: Connecting Children to Nature," *Purdue Journal of Service-Learning and International Engagement*. Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 18.

DOI: 10.5703/1288284316827

Available at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/pjsl/vol5/iss1/18>

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Hands of the Future, Inc.: Connecting Children to Nature

Rebecca Busse, *College of Agriculture*

Author Bio Sketch

Rebecca Busse is the project coordinator for the Nature of Teaching Extension Program. This provides K–5 teachers with standards-based lesson plans related to wildlife, food waste, and health and wellness. She has been volunteering with Hands of the Future, Inc., for three years. In this article, she describes the organization and her experiences with it.

Introduction

I started volunteering with Hands of the Future (HoF) four years ago as a requirement for an environmental education course led by Dr. Dan Shepardson. Student volunteers from this course are required to sign up to help with the weekly Junior Nature Club held by HoF on Tuesday nights at Lilly Nature Center. Area youth grades prek–8 take turns attending the nature program each week based on their grade level. My first observation of the organization was that the club provides a fun program to get kids excited about nature. There were Purdue students and community volunteers who helped manage the activities. There were also crafts and themed snacks to go with the topic of the day. Upon further involvement, I realized that HoF is much more than a junior nature club.

Junior Nature Club participants create their own shelter, tools, and communities

Community Partner Description

Hands of the Future is a 501c(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to connecting children to nature. The organization started six years ago, with a mission to cultivate confidence, life skills, well-being, and value for the natural world, focusing not just on youth, but also on community members of all ages. Programs HoF has led include living schoolyards and junior nature clubs at Lilly Nature Center and Mayflower Mill Elementary School. The living schoolyards program continued for nearly two years in four local elementary schools: Klondike, Cumberland, Happy Hollow, and James Cole. The goal of this program was to help students and teachers create an outdoor classroom on their school grounds. The coordinator for HoF, Zonda Bryant, led these efforts by providing materials, helping students design and build the schoolyards, and giving lessons. Due to a lack of funding, the program was discontinued, but the schoolyards are still used by teachers at all of the schools. New programs the organization has started include forest school camps for pre-k–k youth and survival/nature skill-based workshops for community members of all ages.

A long-term goal of HoF is to acquire land for a children's forest. Children's forests have existed across the country since 1993, but this would be a first for Indiana. The organization's goal would be to transform a plot of woods into a nature-rich site for children, their families, and those young at heart. The finished site would have a barn, a greenhouse, a caretaker's cottage, and eventually a nature center. It would also include spaces dedicated to edible gardens, wildlife and pollinator habitats, and dedicated spaces for younger and older children.

Activities and Impact

Hands of the Future consists of five board members who also serve as the primary volunteers for the organization. HoF looks to the community for partnerships and volunteers. If the organization were to obtain land for a children's forest, Purdue professors and teachers at local grade schools have already expressed interest in using the forest as a field trip destination and an outdoor classroom. The land would provide opportunities for science, forestry, engineering, and art curriculum, as well as the traditional environmental education. It would be a free community resource and a site for a variety of educational programming for youth and adults, including nature camps and a forest school. The programming HoF provides is a community asset. With a bit more funding and volunteers, the organization could continue to grow,

Mayflower bird area.

strengthen their programs, and eventually realize their dream of a children's forest.

Reflection and Conclusion

Working with HoF the past three years has provided me with leadership skills, an opportunity to learn about a nonprofit, and an understanding of the importance of providing nature experiences for children. I've watched the organization grow from one junior nature club to an organization with several successful programs for community members of all ages, and a plan for a children's forest. This young organization is gathering substantial momentum, and they have the potential to achieve great things with additional funding and volunteers. As I continue to work with this organization, I reflect on Dr. Shepardson's class and think about the impact my volunteer experience with HoF has had on my life. My hope for HoF is that more professors and community members engage with the organization to help them reach more youth and make a bigger and continuing difference in their community.

Acknowledgments

To Zonda Bryant, Bill Hoover, Kim Ordonez, Amee Waltman, Dan Shepardson, Amie Muliken, and all the people who have helped Hands of the Future over the years.

Busse, R. (2018). Hands of the Future, Inc.: Connecting children to nature. *Purdue Journal of Service-Learning and Engagement*, 5, 82–83. <https://doi.org/10.5703/1288284316808>

Community Initiatives Multiply University Partnerships

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Student Author Bio Sketch

Christopher LaFontaine is a senior studying psychology and sociology at Indiana Purdue Fort Wayne (IPFW). He has concentrated on community engagement and service learning as areas of focus for the past year. He plans to pursue a career in applied sociology and he has been involved with applied research among vulnerable populations. Christopher has worked with homeless veterans in Fort Wayne and has studied health conditions in a rural county that ranks low in health outcomes. In this article, he describes his experience with service-learning partnerships between community organizations and an institution of higher education.

Introduction

I first became involved with community engagement collaboration in a fall 2017 course (SOC 340) led by Dr. Sherrie Steiner. In the course, we were required to complete a project that involved a collaboration with Blackford County Concerned Citizens (BCCC) and IPFW students, made possible by a service-learning grant from Purdue University. The scope of this project was to present evidence to residents and city officials of Hartford City, Indiana, that dangerous fugitive dust produced from the operations of a local steel recycling plant is affecting public health in the community. Residents of Hartford City and BCCC are asking city officials to relocate the steel recycling plant away from the residential neighborhood in which it currently operates to an industrial park that is well suited for their operations. If relocation of the steel recycling plant is successful, a large brownfield will remain.

The president of BCCC—a master gardener, trained by Purdue Extension—initiated this collaboration to present an imaginary greenhouse design to residents as a form of prefigurative politics to inspire and empower residents to transform their neighborhood. Leach (2013) describes prefigurative politics as a political orientation that seeks to bring about social changes as a result of the embodiment or “prefigured” changes sought to be realized by the group. BCCC has initiated this collaboration with IPFW to use the greenhouse near Kettler Hall as an exploratory project to show Hartford City residents the reasonability and practicality of aboveground gardening on brownfields. The political aspect of prefigurative