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UNPLUGGED: FOSTERING CONNECTIONS TO NATURE



ESSAY: COLIN McENROE



Unplugged

By COLLEEN FITZPATRICK



The movers and shakers of the Unplugged Learning Project are, from left: Chris Gackstatter, Susan Rietano Davey, Larry Sparks (back), Joe Pereira, Laura Young and Carrie Firestone.

Photo by Shana Sureck

Larry Sparks grew up in a rural town not far from the confluence of two Connecticut River tributaries. He did the things typical of boys his age – went to school, joined the Cub Scouts, caught crawfish in the creek.

He and his friends also built fires at a campsite on the Appalachian Trail near his yard, and, wrapped in the scent of wood smoke, traded stories. Sometimes he got to sleep out overnight; breakfast was always a plate of his mom's pancakes, soaked in real maple syrup.

But the neatest thing was hiking 2½ miles through the snow to a remote pond, his hockey stick slung over his shoulder, his ice skates slung over his hockey stick, a peanut butter and jelly

sandwich, chocolate bar, and orange tucked in his pockets, and seeing from the top of the hill that the frozen surface of the pond below was clear of snow. If he was lucky enough to arrive before the other boys, then the joy of being the first to slice across the pristine ice was his.

Four decades later, these boyhood recollections are not far from Sparks' mind. As assistant principal at Avon's Roaring Brook School, which teaches students from kindergarten to fourth grade, he knows how important his childhood wanderings through the natural world were to shaping the person he has become. He sees little of that happening among today's kids. They are a cell-phoning, text-messaging, Twittering, PlayStationing,

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UNPLUGGED

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iPod-ing, Wii-ing generation, a generation whose young lives are scheduled to the hilt around sports, “play dates,” and other organized activities. And this worries him.

It worries him, he says, not because he opposes any of the activities listed above; he doesn't. But it's a matter of balance. He wonders about the opportunities that are being missed by

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adhering to an indoor, electronics-driven, planned-out lifestyle. Where is the chance for the high school student in a tech class to create a hinged instrument based on having taken apart a crawfish tail as a boy and studying its construction?

And Sparks' concern is even more fundamental. “We're biological creatures,” he says. “If we deprive ourselves of outdoor experiences, we've failed to fulfill certain inalienable rights by our maker.”

Last fall, Sparks encountered Susan Rietano Davey, a board member of the Avon Land Trust and the mother of four children, including a Roaring Brook student. She was waiting outside the school for her son to come out so the two could bike home together.

Sparks thought: Aha – this is the kid who belongs to the lone bike I see in the rack every day. And a parent who bikes to and from school each day with her child – how great is that?

He and Rietano Davey got to chatting. Both had read and admired a book by Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder* (Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2005; 2nd edition, 2008). Though not the first book to make the case for the value of immersing children in nature, it certainly has become one of the most influential.

Rietano Davey took from the book the sense “that we're not doing our children any favors by allowing them to get so disconnected from the natural world. If we want them to be stewards of the environment, they need to know the environment. Beyond that, for them to become the innovators and thinkers of the future, they need to have time alone – outside alone with their thoughts or alone in a group to create a game without adults imposing their own rules. If children don't have time to be alone with their thoughts, they tend not to value their thoughts, or even to be able to access them.”

She listened as Sparks described his dream of creating an outdoor classroom at Roaring Brook: It could have a rustic tree house, an amphitheater; it could be connected by trails to the high school, where students from both schools could meet to read poetry together or talk about how the pioneers of the

Farmington River Valley lived off the land.

Rietano Davey, herself the product of many hours spent outdoors while growing up in Norwalk, shared his excitement. “Let me grab a couple of my land trust friends and let's see how we can work together,” she proposed.

Soon, she and Sparks, with Chris Gackstatter, Laura Young and Carrie Firestone, all of the Avon Land Trust, retired science teacher Roger Kirschen, and Roaring Brook teacher Joe Pereira were meeting weekly to figure out how to get Avon's children flexing their lungs instead of their thumbs.

In January, the group announced the Unplugged Learning Project, whose goals include encouraging outdoor education, pedestrian travel and land stewardship in order to enrich children's education and connect Avon residents of all ages to the natural environment and to each other. In the group's first activity, and as part of a One Town, One Book event with the Avon Free Public Library, residents were encouraged to read Louv's book.

Then in March, the project hosted a community discussion at Avon High School. Keynote speaker David Leff, Canton author, historian, and former deputy commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection, eloquently discussed three needs: the need to preserve Avon's land base; to educate people about the value of open spaces; and to sponsor loosely organized family activities, such as hikes with a naturalist, in hopes of fostering in future generations long-term interest in the land and caring for it.

“I've spent more than 30 years as a volunteer and in a career in the environment, and I know it wouldn't take more than a generation of children who grow up not caring to reverse all the progress that we've made” since the first Earth Day 40 years ago, Leff says.

“Kids in school today know more about the environmental function of wetlands than I did when I was in school, probably more than when I was in college,” he continues. “But they know a lot less about the habits of muskrats and animal life and the differentiation in rocks.” That physical experience is important, he says, because “it exercises the mind to know that there are whole other worlds outside of what human beings have created. That not all creation is a work of human beings – that there's a creation of a larger providence that is worthy of exploration and that will enrich their lives forever.”

Leff's former DEP colleagues also applauded the Unplugged project, which is in line with the department's No Child Left Inside initiative. Announced in 2006 by Gov. Jodi Rell, the initiative seeks to reconnect families with the outdoors, build generations of environmental stewards, and showcase state parks and forests.

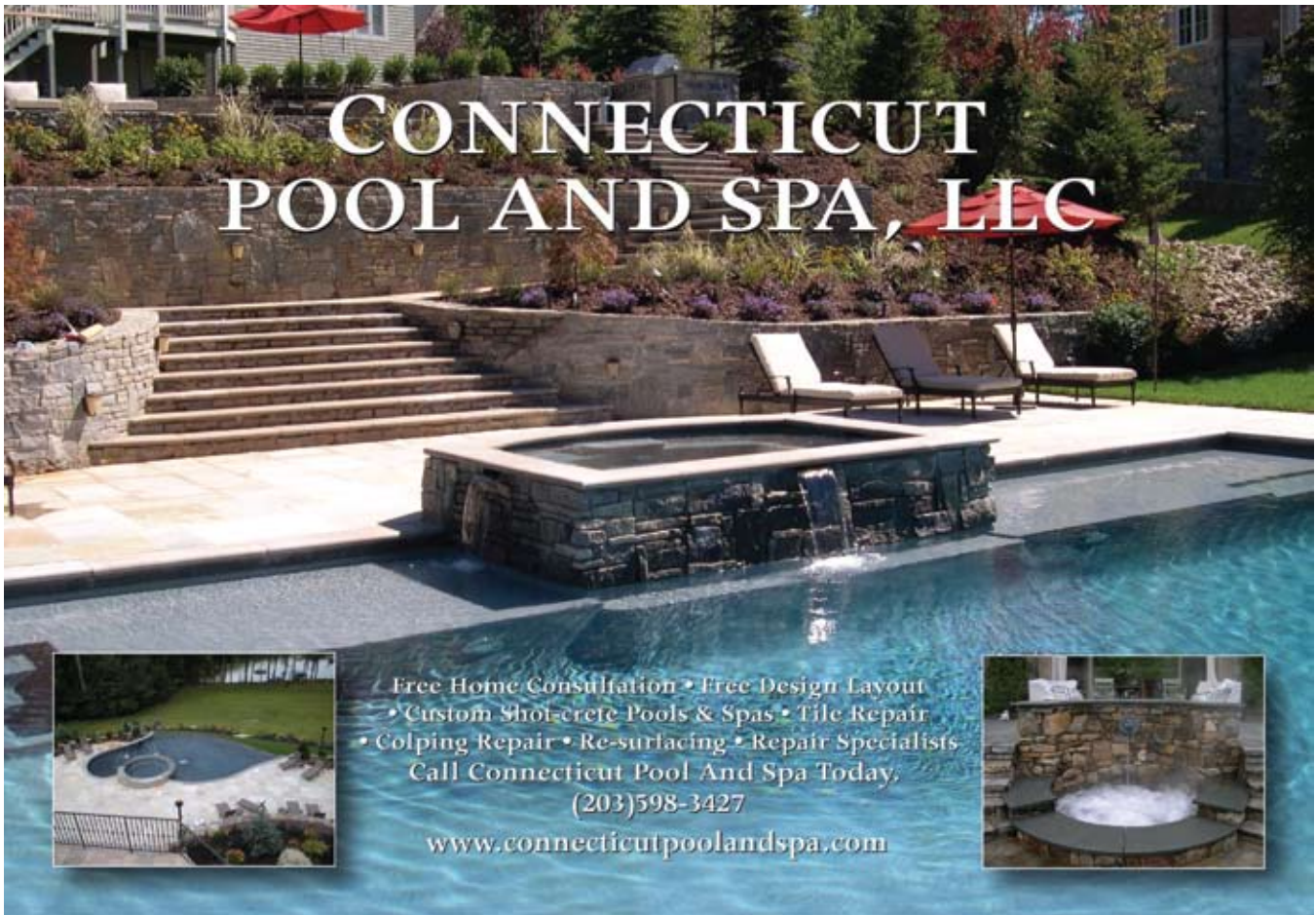
“It's wonderful that Avon is doing this,” says Diane Joy, DEP assistant director for state parks. “We love the fact that they're getting such tremendous community support. ... We think the ownership for these kinds of ideas should come at the local level. People want to know what they can do in their own back yards.”

Avon's Unplugged founders have a few projects in mind and are looking into possible funding sources. Eighteen percent of the town – 2,604 acres, including the land trust's holdings of 344 acres – is open space: parks, hiking and biking trails, school yards, and such. Much of the open space exists as small, noncontiguous parcels, which members would like to begin connecting, where appropriate, through a network of trails.

Members also envision partnering at some point with a DEP program that shows teachers how they can take existing

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curricula and deliver lessons outdoors. And Sparks would like to add Roaring Brook's name to that of Pine Grove School on the list of schools in Avon with outdoor classrooms.

But many of the next steps are up to residents. Says Rietano Davey, "This isn't about 'Let's build a playground, let's make a trail.' This is about changing the culture of our town, changing the way people think and behave."

To that end, hearing from residents with ideas for preserving and using open space is key – like the suggestion from the woman who proposes building an outdoor altar behind a church and holding services outdoors in good weather.

"How nice would that be?" Rietano Davey says. "That's the kind of stuff we want. There may be wonderful little neighborhood ideas that we had never considered. We're not looking to be the implementers necessarily, we're looking to help bring people together and think of the ideas, and certainly to help on some of the initiatives, but to have people come together and create their own groups all within this umbrella of unplugging and getting outside."

Sparks has an added vision, one that is grounded in the educational system. The ultimate outcome of the Unplugged Learning Project, he says, "would be to have a K through 12 informal curriculum that produces modern high-school graduates that have that *je ne sais quoi*, combined with an appreciation of the value of having a sustainable planet, green economy, and a connection to nature. But not just nature – Avon's nature, with its own geography and local history." ❏

Colleen Fitzpatrick is a freelance writer who lives in Simsbury.

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