



JEFFERSON COUNTY HEALTH ACTION PARTNERSHIP



LOOKOUT MOUNTAIN CONSERVANCY

Good Health FOR ALL

BY ELISABETH PTAK

HOW PROTECTED LAND CAN IMPROVE PEOPLE'S HEALTH AND LIVES



DAVID ROCCO



FRESHWATER LAND TRUST

TOP LEFT: The Jefferson County Health Action Partnership, which includes Freshwater Land Trust (FLT), sponsors the “Walking School Bus” to encourage good health among urban youth in Birmingham, Alabama. TOP RIGHT: Students from a Tennessee high school found themselves, and each other, working in the woods. One student says, “The first time I came out here, I didn’t know anyone’s name, nor did I want to. Now I know everyone’s name...This is really big for me.” BOTTOM LEFT: More than 500,000 visitors a year cross the Walkway Over the Hudson State Historic Park, a project involving Scenic Hudson Land Trust. BOTTOM RIGHT: Children hike along Five Mile Creek in Jefferson County, Alabama. The Five Mile Creek Greenways Partnership, spearheaded by FLT, envisions a network of trails, greenways and parks along the entire 28-mile stretch of the creek.

All Americans should have the opportunity to make choices that allow them to live a long, healthy life, regardless of their income, education or ethnic background. —Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

The Howard School in Chattanooga, Tennessee, sits practically in the shadow of the biologically diverse and historically significant Lookout Mountain. The inner-city high school is located just 2 miles from John C. Wilson Park on the mountain’s north end. One of the most important Civil War battles was fought at the site, and the park offers access to a network of public trails. But most of the Howard students had never been there.

With lives confined mainly to their homes in public housing projects and to an urban school rife with gangs and crime, the highschoolers tended to be distrusting, on guard, self-protective, says Robyn Carlton, CEO of the Lookout Mountain Conservancy (LMC), which owns the parkland. “They live in isolation from the rest of the city and from themselves. They don’t really even know each other’s names.”

Millions of people experience health disparities based on factors outside their control, which puts them at higher risk for obesity, diabetes, heart disease, asthma and other costly diseases. Neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, public policy decisions and quality of available medical care all play critical roles in determining whether people live healthy lives; individual decisions are also important. The students at the Howard School seemed to be reasonably close to places where they could exercise, but they weren’t taking advantage of the opportunity. They needed a helping hand.

Beginning in 2012 LMC began to work directly with these kids in a pilot outdoor classroom project funded by the Tennessee American Water Company. “Environmental Connections” was created with science teachers from Howard in a partnership with the Center for Mindful Living (CML). Carlton and trained CML professionals took the students to the site and taught them

restoration skills for the land and themselves. They explained how to breathe, how to stop and get settled within themselves and how to connect with things outside themselves. Carlton, a former teacher and mental health professional, explains: “Interior health translates to physical health.”

On the first day, students arrived dressed in their school uniforms to do the dirty work of pulling invasive kudzu and removing trash. They didn’t know the names of tools or how to use them. But perhaps the main thing they learned about themselves that day was that they were in awful shape; after just 45 minutes, many of them were exhausted.

By the second session, they were able to do more, and they *wanted* to do more. By their third visit to the park, the students had acquired stamina, confidence in their abilities and an eagerness to see the effect of their invasive species eradication work. Most important, they had developed trust—in themselves and in each other.

“It’s been transformational for them *and* for me,” says Carlton. “It gives kids an opportunity to make different choices. And what a great choice to be able to do something purposeful for the community and the land. All kids want a place where they can be safe, where they belong, and where they have purpose.”

“This work is hard!” says 15-year-old Scheniqua. “I’m used to playing computer games and watching TV. I don’t have the money to go to an inside gym to get in shape, but who needs that when we have this great outdoor gym that can get you in shape. Mother Nature has the best deal in town: if you keep her in shape, she’ll keep you in shape!”

Providing Opportunities for Better Health Choices

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that obesity is common, serious and costly, and that it affects some groups more than others. In Alabama, more than a million adults and 18% of the children are obese. “Jefferson County, in particular, is a problem,” says Health Officer Dr. Mark Wilson, “because we have a pretty significant minority population at higher risk for obesity.”

The county includes Birmingham and 28 other municipalities, some of them vestiges of segregation. "West Birmingham is mostly lower-income African-Americans with more health problems," he explains. "In the more affluent cities, you have a well-heeled population of healthy, wealthy, white people and less obesity."

His department used a community health assessment to develop an overall strategy to help people integrate exercise into their lives more. That fits well with the Freshwater Land Trust's (FLT) mission of protecting the area's rivers and streams by conserving lands that enhance water quality, preserve open space and provide recreational opportunities, says Executive Director Wendy Jackson.

The idea also made good sense to the Community Foundation of Birmingham, which joined with the Department of Health and the United Way of Central Alabama to form a Health Action Partnership that now boasts a large consortium of community partners. The group won a \$13 million grant to fight smoking and obesity. FLT was a sub-grantee charged with coming up with a master plan for a trail system.

"The beautiful thing about what FLT has done is get the community involved," notes Dr. Wilson. The land trust hosted multiple community meetings; 3,000 people—representatives from every municipality and every social and demographic group in Jefferson County—participated. Together they developed a master plan for the Red Rock Ridge and Valley Trail System to connect a network of existing parks.

Enabling the Pursuit of Health Goals

Abandoned and sometimes polluted industrial areas along many of America's major rivers are a legacy of obsolete uses and seldom offer nearby residents access to the waterway or to nature. "Where communities should have a front doorstep on the river, instead they've got back alleys," says Steve Rosenberg, executive director of Scenic Hudson Land Trust (SHLT).

The Poughkeepsie, New York-based group has been working with these types of sites on the Hudson for a number of years. "Now we want to engage with the public, both to ensure that the parks along the river are being 'activated,' and to maximize the recuperative, revitalizing opportunity that being out in the parks represents," Rosenberg says.

As the largest environmental organization focused on the Hudson River Valley, SHLT has created or protected more than 50 parks, preserves and historic sites up and down the river. The organization is looking for ways to advance and collaborate on projects that allow connections between the seven small cities in its area of influence by creating biking and walking links between parks and urban areas while at the same time protecting the scenic corridor.

One of those projects is the historic 19th century Poughkeepsie-Highland Railroad Bridge. Scenic Hudson was a major supporter of the repurposing of the 1889 structure. Now transformed into the Walkway Over the Hudson State Historic Park, it's the world's longest elevated pedestrian span. More than 500,000 visitors a year walk, run, ride bikes, rollerblade or use wheelchairs to cross its 1.28-mile length some 240 feet above the river.

"The park has become an incredible place for all kinds of people," says Rosenberg. "You get the sense that thousands of them have made the bridge walk part of their everyday lives."

Restoring the Environment/Restoring People

The land trust business is a good fit for veterans transitioning to civilian life, says Robert Keller of the Atlantic Coast Conservancy (ACC) in Jasper, Georgia. As a former U.S. Navy intelligence specialist with a doctorate in conservation biology, Keller is well aware of their many transferable job skills.

In 2010, he started ACC, offering services like writing conservation easements, creating baseline documentation reports and monitoring conserved properties.

Keller knew he wanted to offer preferential hiring for veterans. "Vets are task-oriented and detail-oriented; they're careful, and many have computer skills. You can count on vets," he says.

Like Cheyenne Steptoe.

After serving in the U.S. Marine Corps, Steptoe worked as an electrician until construction projects dried up in his part

Resources

America's Health Rankings

www.americashealthrankings.org/ALL-AL/2012

"A New Way to Talk about the Social Determinants of Health"

www.rwjf.org/content/dam/farm/reports/reports/2010/rwjf63023

Greening Youth Foundation

www.gyfoundation.org

National Hispanic Environmental Council

<http://nheec1.org>

African American Outdoor Association

www.africanamericanoutdoors.com

Outdoor Afro

www.outdoorafro.com/about



ATLANTIC COAST CONSERVANCY



FRESHWATER LAND TRUST

of the state. He picked up small jobs, including one at Keller's home, where the two ex-military men found they spoke the same language.

Now, as ACC's conservation technician, Steptoe does field assessments using photography and GIS to document, map and monitor natural resources and climate change on conserved properties. Sometimes he travels by ATV and often by foot. "Helps me stay in shape," says Steptoe. "And I realize how much I enjoy being outside rather than under a house. I get paid to go out and look at beautiful land. We tore so much of it up, it's good to be able to save some of it."

Keller notes, "We have a workforce that needs to be retrained—men and women who have paid our country a great service. If we put them into natural resources, it would go a long way to restoring our environment and restoring our people, too."

Giving Every Community a Chance

Mention the words "Big Sur," and some people envision car commercials, but most conservation-minded people think of the grand views and dramatic coastline on California's Highway One. Protecting that incomparable landscape and its natural wonders was the inspiration for the formation of the Big Sur Land Trust (BSLT) in 1978.

Most people probably *don't* envision Salinas with its run-down neighborhoods and poor-performing schools. Known as the "Salad Bowl of the World," the city is part of the nation's number one agricultural area, but it also has a large incidence of gangs, violence and health issues, many of them related to exposure to pesticides. More than 50% of the population is Hispanic.

Says BSLT Executive Director Bill Leahy, "Creating healthy, whole communities requires the land trust to broaden its relationships and promote new partnerships. High-density communities are currently suffering from health challenges and social issues associated with a lack of access to natural open space and recreation opportunities."

BSLT is reaching out to Salinas groups, including Communities Organized for Relational Power in Action (COPA), whose goal is to develop collaborative projects and initiatives that lead to more access to parks and nature as part of a broader shared commitment to healthy, vibrant communities.

"We want to help restore the capacity for people to be citizens in the fullest sense, so people feel a sense of stewardship in shaping what goes on within their neighborhoods," says Joaquin Sanchez, lead organizer for COPA.

Leahy adds, "Our focus on lending our experience to foster healthy connections between land and people—especially in the context of youth and families—overlaps with COPA's work to develop grassroots support and leadership in Salinas that will lead to a healthier and more prosperous future for its residents. Through our relationship with COPA, we can see what we need to do differently and create a more powerful brand of land trust work."

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Agents of Change

By offering connections to the outdoors, especially to those who might not otherwise have access or opportunity, land trusts are showing they can be agents of change. In Birmingham, awareness about the health benefits of greenways has completely shifted, and Freshwater Land Trust's Wendy Jackson is thrilled. "Now everybody's talking about it. It's given us a platform. We're doing something transformative to communities, and bringing a renaissance to Birmingham." 🍀

WRITER AND EDITOR **ELISABETH PTAK** WORKS WITH CONSERVATION GROUPS AND NONPROFITS TO TELL THEIR STORIES IN PRINT AND ONLINE. HER LATEST BOOK, *MARIN'S MOUNTAIN PLAY: ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF THEATRE ON MOUNT TAMALPAIS*, IS FORTHCOMING. WWW.ELISABETHPTAK.COM