

# quill

NEWSLETTER FROM THE SCHUYLKILL CENTER FOR ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION | WINTER 2014-2015

## STILL PIONEERING AFTER ALL THESE YEARS

By Mike Weilbacher, Executive Director

In 1965, Lyndon Johnson proclaimed his Great Society, Sandy Koufax pitched the Dodgers to the World Series title, "The Sound of Music" was selling out movie theaters, and the Righteous Brothers "lost that lovin' feelin'."

At the same time, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* was already a best-seller, focusing public attention of DDT's ability to accumulate in birds' eggshells, causing a thinning that was endangering many birds, including the bald eagle. Urban smog was a huge issue, words like "pollution" and

"ecology" were only just catching on...

...and two longtime Roxborough-area families, the Meigs and Smiths, had just commissioned the National Audubon Society to studying the possible use of a massive property off Hagy's Mill Road as a nature center. They hired a young high school science teacher to make their nascent dream come true.

So the then-rail-thin Richard L. James arrived here on July 1, 1965 for his first day of work (his journal entry for that day is reproduced here). Setting up shop in the

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19<sup>th</sup>-century River House on the bluffs overlooking the Schuylkill, he began planning the Schuylkill Valley Nature Center, the first environmental education center in a major American city.

The Center built the region's first wheelchair accessible nature trail, pioneered programs in the emerging field called "environmental education," including convening the region's first environmental education teacher conferences.

Now, 50 years and millions of people, thousands of volunteers, hundreds of staff

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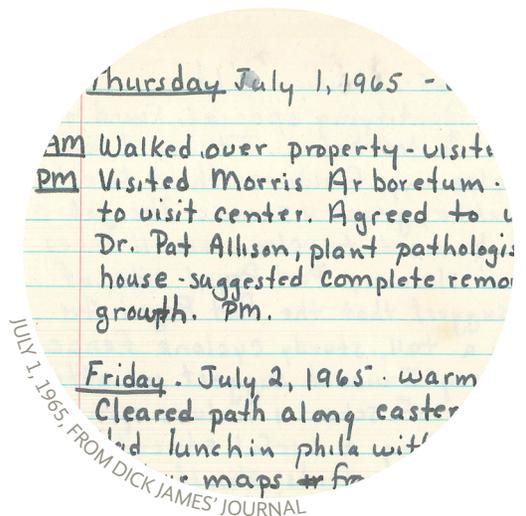
NATURE CENTER FOUNDERS (FROM LEFT) LAWRENCE M. C. SMITH, HIS WIFE ELEANOR HOUSTON SMITH, HER HALF-SISTER MARGARET HOUSTON MEIGS, AND MARGARET'S SON HENRY, BREAKING GROUND FOR THE SOON-TO-BE-BUILT SCHUYLKILL VALLEY NATURE CENTER IN 1967.

50 YEARS  OF PEOPLE + NATURE

**50** The Schuylkill  
Center



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# director's cut

## 2015: A GREAT LEAP FORWARD

This coming year, we'll be celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our 1965 founding—and I invite you to join us at special celebrations throughout the year.

Though we'll be marking the last 50 years, we've got our eyes fixed firmly on the future. Starting in February, we'll begin the huge effort of retiring our monstrous 1968 oil furnace—an environmentally unfriendly heat, without question—and moving to a more efficient system. It's our first step in growing into our new master plan, a radical makeover of both our building and our property, a re-envisioning of a nature center in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Other steps: we've commissioned a team of environmental artists to work with a landscape architect to create a walking trail along Hagy's Mill which will include an art installation. We're hoping to make our physical connection to the Schuylkill River Trail much more visible, add to our nature playscape, and improve several key trails. (Yes, we're also looking at solutions to our lumpy, bumpy driveway!)



In the Visitor Center, we'll improve the auditorium's sound and appeal, continue bringing more classrooms into use, and kick up our restrooms aesthetically (while better conserving water). Even this Quill is different, its graphic appearance shifting to reflect our new directions.

So throughout the year, as you return for visits and programs, you'll see changes afoot. But as you read the center spread's walk through our past 50 years, please know that this matches the scope of our ambitions for the next 50.

We've done great things together, but we have so much road left ahead—and this year marks a great leap forward on this adventure. So glad you are on the journey with us.

You'll also notice tucked into this Quill an end-of-year gift envelope. In the season of giving, as we enter our 50<sup>th</sup> year, consider being a part of our work to rehabilitate injured wildlife, restore our forest, and teach lots of people through a tax-deductible contribution. Thank you!

Warmly,

Mike Weilbacher, Executive Director, [mike@schuylkillcenter.org](mailto:mike@schuylkillcenter.org)

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Liz Vaden, Preschool Teacher  
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Michele Wellard, Assistant Wildlife Rehabilitator  
Elisabeth Zafiris, Manager of Public Programs

# naturalist's notebook

## GIANTS OF THE FOREST: READING THE FOREST

By Melissa Nase, Manager of Land Stewardship

EVERY DAY AT THE SCHUYLKILL CENTER I am reminded of the passing of time, the history of the land, and the immense power of plants to change our landscape. Amazed at how the trees could grow so tall in just 50 years, I stand in awe of the towering tulip poplars which rise high above old fields once clear cut for agriculture. As winter approaches and vegetation retreats, ruins and farm walls of old homesteads reveal themselves as markers of the past.

In the summer of 1974, volunteer Gus Wiencke assembled an extensive report entitled "Biggest Trees at the Schuylkill Valley Nature Center," detailing land history and size, species, location, and even sketches of growth patterns of the property's largest trees. The original survey presents 57 exceptionally large trees, although many far exceed that now.



YEAR AFTER YEAR, TRACES OF THE OLD FARM FIELDS GROW DIMMER AND A FOREST SPREADS

traces of the old farm fields grow dimmer and a forest spreads in the protected haven of the Nature Center. Our biggest trees are the aristocrats in a unique, unviolated area of self-propagated woodland." These trees exist with little help from us, and in many cases, perhaps, in spite of us. Join us

at the Giants of the Forest walk in January to see some of these big trees, learn about why they remained during the farm years, and find out what they can tell us about the past. ➤

[READ MORE ABOUT THESE TREES ON OUR BLOG](#)

coming up:

GIANTS OF THE FOREST

January 24, Free for members

Hike past old fields and ruins to the largest trees in our forest.

It has been 40 years since Gus compiled this list of biggest trees, yet I'm experiencing his observations in a similar way these days. He concludes, "Year after year,

## CELEBRATING 15 YEARS OF ART IN NATURE

By Christina Catanese, Director of Environmental Art

IN 2001, JANE INGRAM ALLAN BECAME the Schuylkill Center's first artist in residence, engaging youth in making a map of the earth with paper pulp and seeds and making paper with local plant materials. It was the beginning of the Center's pioneering art program, which has gone on to offer 20 outdoor exhibitions, 11 artist residencies, and dozens of gallery shows.

But the story begins in 2000 when Mary Salvante, armed with vision and years dedicated to the arts, started working with the Center to found the program.

Salvante knew the Schuylkill Center well, being the wife of former Executive Director Dennis Burton, and she was sure it would be the perfect place to showcase environmental art. "There was a lot for

artists to work with in response to the environmental mission," she says. She continues that interest was building for "art programs that could support education not just in environmental sciences but other academic areas."

Her vision was to first open the gallery in the Center's front lobby, then add site-specific works on trails and a residency program. Ultimately, she made that vision a reality, and spearheaded the program



JANE INGRAM ALLAN'S STUDENTS UNROLL A MAP.

until 2009.

Now, 15 years after the art program's founding, we pause to celebrate a decade-and-a-half of environmental art at the Schuylkill Center. Over the years, artists have grappled with challenges and wonders in our ecosystem and shared their responses in diverse media: sculptures powered by wind, light, and rain; floating structures; literally living artworks; photography of wildlife clinic rehabilitators; even dance and music performances.

As ecological challenges grow in complexity, environmental art must respond. Join us in January for the James lecture (page 5), *Art for a Changing Planet*, where artist Mary Mattingly will explore emerging art in the time of climate change. ➤

# PIONEERING

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

members, and one name-change later, we are gearing up to celebrate our golden anniversary as one of the region's premiere and still-pioneering environmental education centers.

And we're inviting you to join the festivities, because let's face it: as a member of the Schuylkill Center, we wouldn't be here without you.

Welcome to the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary special edition of *Quill*. Take our center spread's walk through this history, check out the ambitious slate of special programs we'll be presenting throughout 2015, and come celebrate with us. We're also selling 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary wall calendars, featuring new and vintage photos of the Center's many people and programs, available in the gift shop for, what else, \$19.65 (come get one!).

So much has changed in the last 50 years. We sadly lost River House to fire, some very special trees have come down, there are so many more challenges to bringing a school group here...

But the Center, literally and metaphorically the House that Dick Built, is stronger than ever, and yes, still pioneering after all these years. Our environmental art program is the most ambitious in an American nature center; in fact, the art program is featured in 2015's first anniversary event, the Richard L. James Lecture—and environmental art is simply one of many new wrinkles here that would surprise even Dick.

We'll continue the celebrations at February's Creature Comfort, May's Enchanted Forest party, and June's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Picnic, concluding in October with the presentation of the 10<sup>th</sup> annual Henry Meigs Leadership Award, named for the gentleman on the far right in the photo on page 1.

In short, 2015 promises to be one golden year. Come celebrate with us. 🦋

## 1965

We open for business on July 1, with Dick James reporting to work as executive director.

## 1966

First school program takes a class of fifth graders bird watching.

## 1969 – 1970

Graduate classes begin in collaboration with Temple University and Penn State.

## 1972

The Organic Community Gardens open with 200 plots; today, nearly 500 plots are rented by 80 families.



## 1971

Volunteer association begins, and Dick inaugurates his radio forecasts on WFLN-FM, sharing weather and radio essays.



## 1975

The Widener Trail is built as a wheelchair-accessible nature trail.



## 1987

The Wildlife Clinic opens in a 19<sup>th</sup> century barn. The Center celebrates its 1,000,000<sup>th</sup> visitor, surprising the winner and her family.



## 1996

Dick James, our founding executive director, retires, passing away in 1998.

# a walk through 50 years

1965 – 2015

Sunfest, 1983



**1988**

We change our name from Schuylkill Valley Nature Center to Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education.

Trish O'Connell, Wildlife Clinic Director, 1990



**2000**

Environmental Art department founded and begins planning groundbreaking exhibitions.

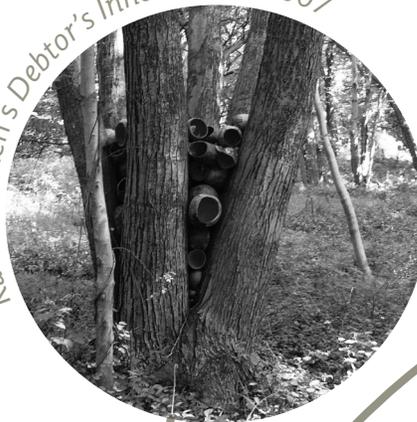
**2000**

Penn's Native Acres established to research invasive species management; program later expanded to restore and preserve a Pennsylvania forest ecosystem.

**2006**

The Center awards the first Henry Meigs Environmental Leadership Award in memory of one of our founders and long-time trustees.

Katie Murken's Debtor's Inheritance, 2007



**2002**

Green Woods Charter School opens at the Schuylkill Center, operating on our site until 2012.

## coming up:

### ENVIRONMENTAL ART FOR A CHANGING PLANET:

4<sup>th</sup> Annual Richard L. James Lecture

January 28, Free, 7 pm

As climate change becomes a part of daily reality, environmental art is evolving to respond. Artist Mary Mattingly presents the James Lecture on the emerging edge of environmental art.

### CREATURE COMFORT: A CELEBRATION OF THE CLINIC

February 28, Free with supplies donation, 11 am

Celebrate the Wildlife Clinic. Meet the clinic's staff and volunteers, get a behind-the-scenes look at the clinic, and enjoy a live animal show of creatures rehabilitated there.

**2013**

Nature Preschool opens in September.

**2015**

We celebrate our golden anniversary with many events, and bury a time capsule in fall 2015.



# volunteer spotlight

## LISA GRUBER AT THE WILDLIFE CLINIC

By Anna Lehr Mueser, Public Relations Manager

**WILDLIFE CLINIC VOLUNTEER LISA** Gruber has always been a birdlover, spending time with her parents in the woods and watching birds, now taking her own children out for hikes and observing birds together. “Birds are the one thing that are very easy to see,” Lisa remarks, explaining that though other wildlife is often elusive, watching birds is open and inviting. When Lisa Gruber found an injured Carolina wren and took it to a bird clinic near Ambler, her eyes were opened to wildlife rehabilitation. Combining her love of birds and her deep caring for ani-

mals, Lisa began volunteering at the Wildlife Clinic in 2013, after spending a season at the clinic in Ambler.

At the clinic, Lisa spends 12 hours or more each week caring for injured and sick wild creatures, learning and preparing to continue on her path to becoming a wildlife rehabilitator. Lisa explains that she’s driven to



volunteer to help “fix the damage humans have caused [to nature] and to...balance things out” for wild animals. Sometimes “we forget that...we share the world with many other creatures,” Lisa says.

For her dedication, kindness, and hard work, we are grateful. Thank you, Lisa! ✨

## ARCELORMITTAL GIFT HELPS RESTORE CATTAIL POND

By Mike Weilbacher, Executive Director

**CATTAIL POND, THE FIRST POND ONE** encounters walking downhill from the Visitor’s Center—and the most-used of our many ponds—began undergoing a facelift in November, thanks to a generous grant from our good friends at ArcelorMittal.

Staff first drained the pond and relocated a variety of turtles and frogs to other ponds. Volunteers led by Land Stewardship Manager Melissa Nase began pulling out invasive plants and vines that were

growing in and around the pond; then Land and Facilities Manager Sean Duffy removed decades of sediment that had filled in and compromised the man-made pond. A new liner will soon be installed, and plantings placed around its edges.

“We’ll be planting a variety of shrubs and wildflowers,” said Melissa, “like buttonbush, cardinal flower, hibiscus, marsh marigold, and reeds and cattails.” Want to help restore Cattail Pond? Volunteers are

welcome; if you want to help, email Melissa ([melissa@schuylkillcenter.org](mailto:melissa@schuylkillcenter.org)).

ArcelorMittal, the global steel and mining company with a steel mill in Conshohocken, has supported numerous Schuylkill Center efforts, including a Spring Lane meadow restoration, and donated steelwork to Stacy Levy’s glorious *Rain Yard*. We thank the company, especially environmental manager Ian Mair, for its long-standing support. ✨



NATURE PRESCHOOL’S AFTERNOON CLASS WATCHES SEAN DUFFY DRAIN WATER FROM CATTAIL POND.



MELISSA NASE AND IAN MAIR BEGIN RESTORATION.

# the season in brief

## HIGHLIGHTS FROM FALL 2014

- 1 Binney Meigs (left) and Mike Weilbacher present Dr. Ann Fowler Rhoads with the **Meigs Award for Environmental Leadership** on September 27.
- 2 Our 31<sup>st</sup> **Halloween Hikes & Hayrides** welcomed a record-breaking 900 people. Special thanks to our White Oak Sponsor, PECO, and our other sponsors: Ballard Spahr, Bartlett Tree Experts, East River Bank, Saul Ewing, Sidium Solutions, The Philadelphia Phillies, and Yards Brewing Company.
- 3 Intern **Ezra Tischler** as a frog at Halloween Hikes. Ezra joined us in September and is helping with environmental art and PR.
- 4 We honored longtime staffers by planting red maples in Founders Grove: (from left) **Camila Rivera-Tinsley**, 11 years; **Susan Marcossan**, 10 years; **Claire Morgan**, 13 years; and **Beatrice Kelly**, 14 years.
- 5 The **Wild Creatures House Party** was hosted by Larry Kaiser, Lindy Snider, Lauren Hart, Dawn Stensland-Mendte, Nina Weisbord, and George Wood (from left). The party supported the wildlife clinic.
- 6 This fall, 66 children enjoyed **Day-Off Camps**, with field trips to Hawk Mountain and the Wissahickon, fort-building, and fun collecting beautiful fall colors.
- 7 Dr. Ann Rhoads gave a lecture and walk with at the inaugural **University of Nature** in September. Over 60 people gathered to learn about environmental art, entomology, forests, and more.
- 8 **Process & Progress** opened in September with work from Land-Lab artists Jake Beckman, Leslie Birch, Zya Levy, Marguerita Hagan, Ben Mills, Maggie Mills, and Kaitlyn Pomerantz.



50 YEARS  OF PEOPLE + NATURE

# 50 The Schuylkill Center



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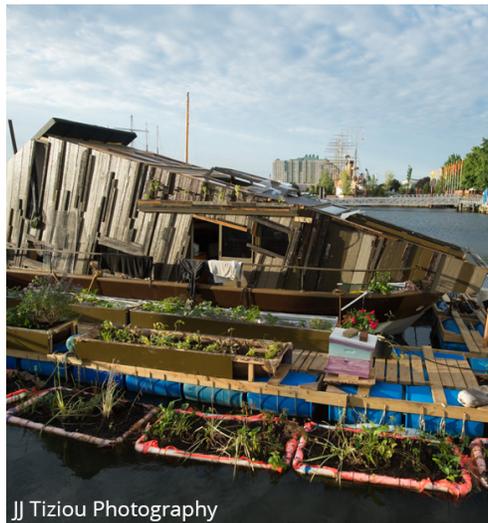
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## this winter

AT THE SCHUYLKILL CENTER



|| Tiziou Photography

**ENVIRONMENTAL ART  
FOR A CHANGING PLANET:  
RICHARD L. JAMES LECTURE**  
WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 28, 7 PM

**CREATURE COMFORT:  
A CELEBRATION OF THE  
WILDLIFE CLINIC**  
SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 11 AM

