

Reflecting on 10 years at the Schuylkill Center



ABOVE: MIKE RECEIVES GIFT FROM MIGHTY OAKS KINDERGARTNERS

WHEN MIKE WEILBACHER FIRST CAME TO THE SCHUYLKILL CENTER 40 YEARS AGO, he never imagined he would one day become its executive director. In 1982, he arrived in Philadelphia, new to the city and fresh out of grad school, to work as an educator under legendary founding director Dick James.

As he suddenly marks the 10th anniversary of his return to the Center, Mike reflects on the transformations of the last decade—and looks ahead to the next challenges.

Back in 2011, Mike knew his return came at a pivotal moment in the organization's history. The charter school that had been renting our space for a decade was departing, leaving a mostly empty building, the lack of space leading to little programming. Where one might see challenges, Mike saw opportunities.

Mike offers that we were, back in our heyday, “one of the most important environmental education organizations in the city, and even the state.” His goal was to restore our relevance within environmental education circles—and bring people in the front door.

To accomplish this, he led a staff and board effort to reimagine the building, and staff began turning our 1968 cinder-block building back into a lively space for programming. We reopened our large 200-seat auditorium, carved an art gallery from a

failed bookstore, united staff on one floor of the building, and turned the classroom wing into the new home of Nature Preschool.

On the programming side, to fill that large auditorium, he inaugurated the annual Richard L. James Lecture, which he says “hopes to bring a large group of adults together to wrestle with cutting-edge information and issues.” He charged staff with creating a family-focused Earth Day festival, which blossomed into Naturepalooza, our most popular one-day event.

He guided staff and board through master and strategic planning exercises that led to the new gateway entrance on the Schuylkill River Trail, the radical makeover of the Visitor Center's front entrance, and the coming transformations of Nature Playscape and our River House site (stay tuned!).

Coming soon, he envisions the Discovery Center, our indoor museum, moving into the 21st century with interactive exhibits on diverse topics like climate change in Philadelphia, and looks to continue improvements across additional spaces in the Visitor Center. Mike also expects our

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ABOVE: A BENCH WAS DEDICATED IN MIKE'S HONOR ON RAVINE LOOP

director's cut

OUR PANDEMIC YEAR



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WHEN WE CLOSED THE NATURE CENTER ON FRIDAY THE 13TH—you can't make that up—back in March of 2020, I assumed we'd return in two or three weeks when (remember this?) we had “flattened the curve.”

Instead, the pandemic upended the world for over a year, killing more than 600,000 Americans and 3.5 million worldwide, putting millions out of work, roiling politics and the economy, and sharpening divisions in an already deeply divided world.

But somehow, at least, the Schuylkill Center has made it through. Thanks in no small part to government loans, we were able to not only hold onto our staff—hallelujah!— but also keep the center open, run our preschool and afterschool programs, offer a wide range of virtual experiences, continue our native plant sales, and so much more. While we struggled last summer at the beginning of the camp season, we quickly found our sea legs and allowed our kids to be outside last summer. This one, too, of course, as we are veterans of pandemic programming.

And because our Nature Preschool was conducted fully outdoors this year, and because we had 100% buy-in from parents and staff, the COVID caseload was blessedly small, knock wood. The same was true across our entire staff and community. We did get immensely lucky, but we did wield nature and the outdoors as our secret—and successful—weapon in the fight.

So as we slowly (hopefully) crawl out of the rubble of the past year, I am painfully aware that

many businesses and nonprofits were not as lucky as us, nor were many other people we know and love who passed away in this annus horribilis.

As summer reopens the world of possibilities, allow me to offer a deep thanks to our teaching staff who doggedly came in every day to be with our children, whatever the weather. Thanks to our front desk staff for greeting you when you tiptoed in to buy birdseed. Thanks to our Land & Facilities team for plowing driveways, mowing trails, rearranging the building, whatever it took to stay open and serve you. And thanks to everyone else who played key roles throughout the year.

And thanks to you for coming. For walking our trails and offering a donation through the QR code. For increasing your gift because you knew it was a hard year. For allowing us to teach your child face-to-face in a pandemic, though you were terrified of sending her here. For Zooming with us on Thursday nights.

We always appreciate your support, but it is even more special after a year like this. I thank you very much, and hope to see you in person very soon.

All the best,

Mike Weilbacher, Executive Director
mike@schuylkillcenter.org
@SCEEMike on Twitter

tribute to alex levy

1998-2020

WE WERE FIRST INTRODUCED TO ALEX LEVY IN 2019 when he came to help restore the land during a monthly volunteer work session. His enthusiasm and passion for environmental knowledge were palpable to everyone who came in contact with him. Our Land and Facilities team saw him as a perfect fit for our summer internship sponsored by the Alliance for Watershed Education (AWE). In this role, Alex touched many aspects of the Center.

Because of his outgoing personality, Alex was assigned to survey walkers, joggers, and cyclists along our new entrance on the Schuylkill River Trail. He readily engaged casual passersby and gauged their knowledge about all the Schuylkill Center had to offer. Former Land Stewardship Manager Andrew Kirkpatrick warmly remembers, “He was a very sociable person and could get anyone to talk to him.”



Alex played a major role in sculpting the “maple monster,” a beloved 10-foot natural fixture in our Playscape. Director of Land and Facilities Steve Goin recalls, “He used his free time to peel the bark off for one week straight and took joy in updating me on the best tools to complete this task.” Even though this was a thankless job, he never complained

ABOVE: ALEX LEVY and could often be found swinging from a vine or leaning against a tree when taking a break.

Beyond his land responsibilities, Alex shared his kindness and goofiness with our summer campers. Rose Hammerman, a camp counselor, says, “The minute Alex showed up, he'd have the kids flying around and running through the woods with him. They had the biggest smiles on their faces. They were drawn to him because he was easygoing and authentic.”

Unexpectedly, Alex took his own life in August 2020. This loss was deeply felt throughout our entire Schuylkill Center family and especially by those who worked closely with him. Knowing how connected Alex was to our organization, his family reached out to make a donation in his memory. His parents, Sonia and Dan, commented, “Alex would come home from the center and was so excited; he couldn't wait to go back the next day. He was fascinated by nature, and he learned so much about the outdoors

during his tenure.” After several conversations, it was decided that to truly honor Alex's spirit, a permanent memorial would be constructed to bring people together in nature.

In April, we held a dedication and tree planting ceremony in our Founders Grove with Alex's family and friends. Clustered around a platform for meditation (something Alex frequently practiced) are several trees and a bench where people can come for quiet contemplation. The focal point of the space is a regal dawn redwood tree—chosen by Steve Goin, who cannot think of Alex without seeing him swinging from a vine. Dawn redwood is “a fast-growing, straight tree with lots of branches that people can climb and swing from once it grows.” Alex was dichotomous at times; he loved meditation but also loved climbing trees.



ABOVE: DAN AND SONIA LEVY REFLECT AS PARTICIPANTS EACH TOOK TURNS TALKING ABOUT THEIR FAVORITE MEMORIES OF ALEX

The bench at the edge of the platform is constructed from a repurposed black cherry tree that once graced our canopy. Sprinkled around the edge of the platform are rocks harvested from Rose Hammerman's family farm, where Alex spent time working the land and learning about sustainable living.

Please visit this beautiful spot on our grounds. Perhaps you will feel Alex's presence. He is deeply missed.

If you wish to honor a loved one by supporting the Schuylkill Center, please reach out to us at support@schuylkillcenter.org. 🍀



RIGHT: PLANTING A DAWN REDWOOD TREE (DESCRIBED AS ALEX'S SPIRIT TREE)



earth day 2021

ON THURSDAY, APRIL 22, THE SCHUYLKILL CENTER JOINED ALMOST A BILLION PEOPLE WORLDWIDE commemorating the 51st Earth Day. This year, we inaugurated the Earth Day Forest, a new section we will continue planting in every April.

We planted seven oak trees that day—five at our nature center, one at our Wildlife Clinic, and the last at the 21st Ward athletic fields. We chose swamp white oaks as they are a keystone species, supporting more insects, storing more carbon, and slowing more stormwater than most other trees.



WE ASSEMBLED FOR A STAFF TREE PLANTING OF AN OAK TREE GROWN IN ROXBOROUGH FROM AN ACORN COLLECTED BY ONE OF OUR VOLUNTEERS.



EACH OF OUR NATURE PRESCHOOL CLASSES CAME IN TURN AND PLANTED ANOTHER OAK, COMPLETING OUR CIRCLE OF SEVEN OAKS. THIS ACTIVITY INCLUDED WHAT WE CALLED “TICKLING THE ROOTS,” THE KIDS USING THEIR FINGERS TO FREE THE ROOT BALL BEFORE PLACING THE TREE IN THE GROUND.



PLANTING AN EARTH DAY FOREST



WE INVITED OTHER LOCAL CIVIC AND NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATIONS TO JOIN US IN THIS EFFORT, AND THE FRIENDS OF GORGAS PARK CELEBRATED THE DAY BY PLANTING A RED OAK.



THE EARTH DAY PLANNING COMMITTEE AT CATHEDRAL VILLAGE PLANTED A MERRILL MAGNOLIA.



OUTSIDE THE WILDLIFE CLINIC, OUR REHABILITATORS CHRIS STRUB (FAR LEFT) AND LIZ ELLMAN (FAR RIGHT) JOINED MIKE WEILBACHER AND STEVE GOIN IN PLANTING AN OAK.



NATUREPALOOZA, OUR FAMILY-FRIENDLY EARTH DAY FESTIVAL.

sowing seeds of revival

BUILDING THE FIRST IRAQI GUEST HOUSE IN THE U.S.

By Tina Plokarz, Director of Environmental Education

U.S. VETERANS, IRAQI REFUGEES AND THE PUBLIC HELPED BUILD OUR NEWEST ART INSTALLATION, *Al-Mudhif*—A Confluence, on our grounds. The structure, called a *mudhif* in Arabic, is intended to create a welcoming place for intimate storytelling, healing, and recovery. Constructed entirely of phragmites, an invasive reed grass, it is one of the first guesthouses to be built in the U.S. This cutting-edge art project draws on the traditions of Iraqi hospitality and design with nature at its heart.

For centuries, Ma'dan (also known as Marsh Arabs) have been building these large thatched structures, using them for community gatherings and ceremonies. During the Persian Gulf Wars, Saddam Hussein drained and bombed the marshlands where the reed grass grows. In addition to negatively impacting the watershed in the southern part of Iraq, both Iraqi and U.S. military actions drained the landscapes and communities.

It is the aspiration of collaborating artists Sarah Kavage and Yaroub Al-Obaidi that this *mudhif* will serve as a place of sanctuary and belonging, with nature being the vehicle for collective restoration

and cure. This project is part of a larger art initiative, *Lenapehoking~Watershed*, through the Alliance for Watershed Education (AWE) for which Sarah will create multiple site-specific, temporary installations throughout the Delaware River watershed.

On June 24 at 7pm, we will celebrate the opening of the *mudhif* on site. We welcome all to register for this exciting event. Look for summer programming around exchanges of war experiences, healing, and intercultural community building. ✂



ABOVE: IRAQI IMMIGRANTS, U.S. VETERANS AND ARTISTS CAME TOGETHER TO START BUILDING THE MUDHIF

reflecting on 10 years

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programming to meet this unique moment. “We have a narrow window of opportunity to address big issues like climate change and biodiversity loss. How does our programming rise to this challenge?” He continues, “In a very different context, Martin Luther King, Jr. talked of the ‘fierce urgency of now.’ I believe our programming needs that same fierce urgency.” So he continues to raise public awareness on tough issues in our programs and in his weekly columns for the Review, Roxborough’s paper. Mike sees progress in the past 10 years, like our 2016 Year of Climate Change programming, but there’s more to come.

To mark this milestone, the staff and board recently gathered with Mike at a morning celebration, placing a bench in his honor on the Ravine Loop. Staff spent the morning with Mike planting an oak tree and more than 250 trillium bulbs—his favorite wildflower—of 10 species, one for each year. Nature Preschool students also offered him art featuring their hands touchingly wood-burnt into beautiful cedar slabs.

Mike’s tenure has clearly elevated our stature as a regional leader in environmental education. Board of trustees president Christopher P. McGill says, “Mike has created many successful programs—all mission-oriented and positively impacting our community at large. We are so grateful to have him driving the Center’s success now and into the future.”

Former board president Binney Meigs puts it best, “In a time of noisy disinformation, we have an astute quiet voice who isn’t merely disseminating knowledge but is guiding students toward thinking for themselves and eventually, teaching others in numerous, flexible, and creative ways. This requires patience, infinite confidence and gentle strength without a personal agenda. Ultimately, this is the sign of profound and rare leadership which we deeply appreciate in Mike Weilbacher’s tenure at the Schuylkill Center.”

For Mike, his career arc at the Schuylkill Center is pure “poetic symmetry.” Coming here fresh out of grad school, he still pinches himself that he has been able to return. ✂



staff spotlight

EARLY CHILDHOOD LEADERSHIP TEAM

MISSY HORROW IS OUR NEW DIRECTOR OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION. Bringing more than 25 years' experience in the field, Missy has directed three different preschool programs, and has always championed the use of nature and the outdoors.

Only a few weeks into the job, Missy feels, "my whole career has been leading me here and to nature-based education." According to Marilyn Tinari, Interim Director of Early Childhood Education, "Missy brings a rich background and a wealth of experience to our preschoolers."



ABOVE: SARAH AND MISSY

Also joining us is Sarah Watrud as the Assistant Director. Coming from the Aldo Leopold Nature Preschool in Wisconsin, she brings a full decade of experience in early childhood education. Sarah has quickly gotten to know our preschoolers and is "exploring the land while getting to know some of the children's favorite places."

Says Executive Director Mike Weilbacher, "Having two dedicated, accomplished educators will help guide the preschool and I'm looking forward to their transition into the school community."

"I also want to extend our deepest thanks to Marilyn for joining our staff as interim director this year, and for so calmly, wisely, and smoothly steering the preschool through the pandemic whitewaters. We're thrilled that Marilyn will stay with us next year as a member of our Board of Trustees." ✂

bilingual and intergenerational planting

By Emily Sorensen, Communications Intern

SWING BY CENTRO DE CULTURA ARTE TRABAJO Y EDUCACIÓN (CCATE), translated as Center for Culture, Art, Work, and Education, in Norristown on a Wednesday night and outside, you'll see an intergenerational group of kids and parents, educators, and staff speaking a lively mix of English and Spanish. CCATE is a non-profit education center with programs for the Latinx community centered around culture, arts, science, and more. We have been partners with their Garden Club, assisting with sustainable projects such as composting and soil remediation. On one particular Wednesday evening, we were planting a rain garden to collect runoff from their parking lot.

Workshops and classes at CCATE are traditionally project-based and hands-on, which made adjusting to the pandemic especially tricky. Last fall, our environmental educators Eduardo Duenas and Rebecca Deegan sat down with Caitlin Brady, the Environmental Care and Gardening instructor with CCATE, to brainstorm ideas. Caitlin was delighted that "Ed and Rebecca created these engaging and fun Zoom classes—which our team of teachers didn't have a lot of experience with. So they really saved us." We hosted online workshops once a month, covering

topics from composting to gardening to wildlife.

The Wednesday evening Garden Club is a collaboration with both the Audubon Society and us. CCATE has only recently transitioned back to in-person programs and now regulars from the Schuylkill Center show up to help each week. Nine-year-old Magdalena

says she enjoys the program because "They help and if you don't know something they'll teach you." Dr. Rosalva Esquivel Cote, Environmental Care and Gardening instructor with CCATE, says the best part is "working with the kids" as they grow their skills. "For me it's amazing how they learn about the plants, and the soil," she says. "It's just incredible." ✂



quill
SPRING 2021

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supporting

THE SCHUYLKILL CENTER

helps build a future where all people
respect and protect our natural world.



PERFORMANCE ART

this summer

