

H-Zcolumnapril2025    Lest the green open spaces elude us!

Good conversations have been prompted from last month's column. It and the presentation at the McKenna Center discussion of children and youth finding opportunities to learn and discover in our natural world have been notable. The facilitator of our Texas Children in Nature Network, Sarah Coles, spent the evening helping us appreciate the vast benefits when we address Richard Louv's alarms about our growing "nature-deficit disorder" among our young, and, not so young. Both Sarah and our Comal Conservation Executive Director, Ryan Spencer, point to the evident positive impacts for physical and mental health among our youngsters. Similarly, local resident and columnist, Dennis Patrick Slattery added to the discussion as he reflected on "nature, wildness and the human spirit." Several readers who reached out to me indicated, "this topic is spot on!" Some asked, "how can we capture the interest of our local officials and voters?"

First, I must attest to just how important it was to spend some time protected in the shade of great oaks on the Dietz coastal farmstead outside busy New Orleans. When our dad suddenly died as I stepped into my adolescence those canopies and embracing limbs and the myriads of liveliness supported and hosted therein were healing and consequential. It provided a foundation for me to seek out as life unfolded a means to clear my mind and soulfulness so as to press on and remain focused on matters of vocation and service. Corridors and passageways for things that matter came together awesomely.

Second, I visited again with Sarah Coles as well as Ryan Spencer. I asked each to reflect a bit on what excited them about aiming to get our young people into natural settings. Sarah pointed to schools clustering to take on transformational change. Some are "liberating" turf in school spaces to allow students to plant and nurture wildflowers and native grasses and plants. Two folks urged that we not neglect our libraries and their potentials. Indeed, just visit the surrounds of the Tye Preston Memorial library as exemplary. Ryan Spencer pointed out how in his fondest dreams for those of us in Comal County and the Texas Hill Country region we set ourselves toward policies to protect green spaces before they're carved up with the explosive growth we're experiencing. "Yes, I mean encouraging our local citizens to set about embracing enabling bond money to create accessible green spaces near enough for our young to explore and enjoy." It likely means getting with school board members and administrators to design new schools with attention to indoor and outdoor learning supports. The same conversations can then reach out to Sarah and those transforming existing school yards to incorporate smart learning environments. We'll find the experiences among networking schools in our Rio Grande Valley as a cluster of districts look at better utilization of campus surround-spaces. The reports are heartening and the

excited conversations among young learners tell us how important this is for now and the future.

Consider what might come as we pursue in our several local school districts and properties how to help measures take hold. Imagine a nearby campus where students spend time caring for their recently planted trees and pollinator gardens. Seeing large muscles groups put to use digging, watering and tilling would be gratifying. Life lessons abound. Math applications for sorting and plantings emerge. Writing reports, poetry and journaling can transpire. The aesthetics in visual and photographic art will come naturally.

Richard Louv encourages:

“In our family lives, and our schools.... we can do much—right now---to encourage the nature-child reunion.” (Last Child in the Woods, p,286)