

directions

Journal of the Association of Nature Center Administrators | Spring 2020

ANCA Moving Forward

Jen Levy, Executive Director
ANCA — Logan, UT

ON FEBRUARY 25TH I flew to Baltimore for the ANCA Winter Board Meeting. We meet in person twice each year — one day at the Summit, and in the winter for a multi-day planning retreat. Often this meeting is held at a future Summit site, and this year we met at the Irvine Nature Center in Owings Mills, MD who will host in 2022. I was excited and ready for the work ahead; the winter meeting provides us with the opportunity to review and revise our strategic plan and develop our action plans. For me, it is one of the few opportunities to work ‘non-remotely’ with the board, and I love our time together.

Our agenda included time to reflect, share our accomplishments, and engage in a discussion beyond the current plan. We asked each board member to share a strategic achievement for ANCA from the past year. We had a lot to celebrate — we hired two new staff members who are working remotely in MI

and NC, we made progress on our DEI and Advocacy initiatives, we wrapped up an incredibly successful Summit and fundraiser in Ohio, and we surpassed the 700 members milestone. Our celebration discussion set the stage for developing the next steps in our strategic plan and identifying the resources needed to move forward. I left Baltimore one week later feeling exhausted but excited for the work ahead.

Now, less than three months later, it feels like everything has changed. The Covid-19 global pandemic has impacted everyone and resulted in site closures, staff layoffs, and event and program cancellations everywhere.

Instead of resuming work on our strategic initiatives, the ANCA board and staff worked with other leaders in our field writing letters advocating for federal support for our sector. We signed up for countless webinars on the FFCRA and CARES Act to learn about federal



assistance available to ANCA and our members. We spent countless hours and sleepless nights researching and applying for Payroll Protection Program Loans and loan forgiveness requirements. We worked with the ANCA Summit Committee to make the difficult decision to postpone the ANCA Heartland Summit in Iowa until 2021. And now, we are forecasting economic and operational scenarios for the years ahead that reflect a significant reduction in earned revenue.

I won't lie — I am exhausted and



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sad, and this feels like grief.

This month is my 13th anniversary as the executive director of ANCA and in a typical year I would be looking ahead to a summer immersed in Summit planning. And although I have sometimes dreamed of a year off from the Summit, I never thought we would have to postpone the event under these circumstances. We are not cancelling the Summit, instead we plan to hold the Heartland Summit in Iowa in 2021 and host a virtual event this September. We are in the process of building an event that meets the needs of our members.

In late March, we launched a series of virtual meetings, ANCA CONNECTS, to bring members together for sharing and support. More than 300 people have attended and our conversations have focused on building resilience and creative responses. Participants are also using these meetings to work with their peers through the difficult decisions concerning program and event cancellations, facility closures, and staff management. A silver lining to moving our meetings online is ‘seeing’ so many ANCA members who normally do not attend our in-person events. We plan to continue with ANCA CONNECTS indefinitely and stay connected throughout the year.

There are more silver linings to this crisis:

- Nature and environmental learning center professionals are particularly well-suited to responding to changing environments and are adapting quickly. This issue contains stories that showcase incredible creativity and dedication.
- During this time of closures and stay-at-home orders, the ANCA community has stepped

up to create online programming that is true to the mission of connecting people to nature. In many cases, they are reaching people they have never connected with before.

- Across the world, people have been on lockdown and when they do leave their homes, they are flocking to outdoor spaces and nature.
- Discussions among ANCA members have shifted from “How do we get back to what we were doing” to “How do we think and act differently to serve our communities and sustain our operations.” This is a unique opportunity to build a better normal.

It is hard to look ahead for normalcy. There is too much unknown, so we need to pace ourselves and stay healthy. We need to maintain our organizations and facilities so our communities have open space, trails, and programs to return to. We cannot remain in crisis mode indefinitely. Instead we need to find moments of calm and opportunities to take a break from making difficult decisions. We need to find ways to celebrate even the smallest victories with our communities. We need to take the time to reach out to each because we are not alone.

A friend told me recently that doing *something* is always better than doing *nothing*. I needed to hear this because I have struggled through challenging days when all I want is to sit in my house and do nothing. She told me to do something, no matter how small, and take a step in the right direction. I encourage all of you to keep moving forward. Take a small step today and take a few more tomorrow. Take care of your organizations and please, take care of yourselves!

Planning When the World Changes Every Few Days

Mark McKnight, President/CEO

Reflection Riding Arboretum & Nature Center — Chattanooga, TN

AS LEADERS, our jobs have never been simple. Even the most detailed budgets and plans informed and vetted by expert board members and advisors can end up far off the mark. But what the heck do you do during a time like this?

Originally, I was going to write for ANCA about our success in growing summer camps. After doubling our revenue and attendance year-over-year from 2018 to 2019, we were poised for even better results in 2020 and were looking forward to what that would mean for hiring and continuing to grow [**Reflection Riding Arboretum & Nature Center**](#), an organization that had been through a few tough decades. Any 65-year-old organization will go through a rough patch here and there, and our staff had rallied around our dramatic transformation over the prior years. Everything was moving in the right direction. Donations and membership, program attendance, board involvement were always up, up up! Salaries were catching up with expectations, we had received our first major grant in a decade, and things were going great.

And then...

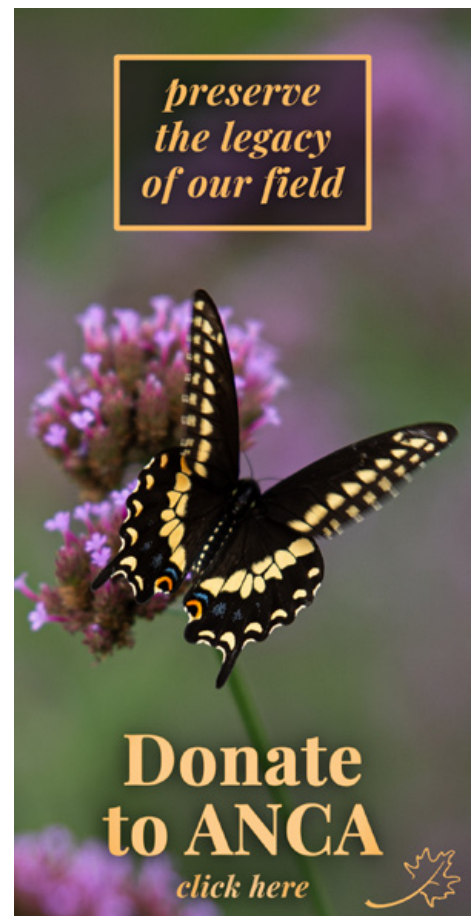
First, there were mentions of this new virus among our investment committee. As the virus quickly spiraled into a pandemic in Asia, Europe started seeing issues, and then there was a cruise ship where the virus had run rampant.

New York became a hotspot. We

had our first local case soon after. School field trips canceled. The following week, all schools in the area closed. Students were sent home to parents ill-prepared for home-schooling. Teachers had a week to rewrite every class for online-only instruction as many school systems extended spring break. Soon, we found ourselves in a dystopian lockdown that was unimaginable just a few weeks prior.

Like saving for retirement, the best time to start planning for disaster is many years back, and the second-best time is right now. I'm proud of the way our organization navigated this pandemic so far, so I wanted to share our process in the hopes that it will either help you now or help you the next time you face an unexpected challenge.

We're not out of the crisis yet, but as I've thought through how we've navigated so far, three main



Summer camp at Reflection Riding in 2019. Photo by Joseph Schlabs.



themes arose. Each of these points below could be—and certainly is somewhere online—treated more thoroughly with its own article. I’ll be as brief as possible but am happy to continue the discussion on the [ANCA Google Group](#) if anyone has questions about a particular point.

1) Build a functional and responsive board with good governance practices

I cannot overstate the importance of this point. I’ve been a board member before and I’ve served on dysfunctional boards and highly-functional boards. Now that I’m on “the other side” and work as a nonprofit CEO, I’m even more aware of how critical the board can be to the overall success or failure of an organization.

Thanks to one board member with extensive training in law and nonprofit management, we had a head start on governance. We have assembled a diverse group with deep expertise in the issues we face. We put media policy in place a couple of years ago, so staff and board all knew to direct reporters to me. We had a clear chain of command between staff and leadership. We had established processes for documenting board discussions, giving me legal cover on any of the more complicated decisions we ended up making.

We quickly convened a small crisis committee consisting of board members who I could check in with to vet ideas and inform my next moves. We included an attorney, accountant, wealth advisor, CFO of a local private school, and a venture capitalist. This group met with our wealth management firm and helped formulate a liquidity plan to keep our staff employed. This was before the PPP loans had been created, so we had to decide how



Kids at Reflection Riding, before the pandemic.

much of the staff to keep on payroll and how long we could afford to do that with available assets in our investment fund. We completed a cash flow model and discussed potential revenue opportunities. Although many of the most critical decisions have passed, we still meet every Friday by videoconference to quickly discuss cash flow and financial position as well as any new concerns that have arisen in this constantly-changing crisis.

We definitely would not be where we are right now without such a dynamic and active board.

2) Create a culture of innovation with staff

The most impressive part of my team’s reaction to this crisis has been their willingness—even eagerness—to pivot quickly and do whatever may be necessary to stay afloat. This culture of innovation and openness to change didn’t come naturally and took some time, but we had already done all the hard work before the COVID-19 crisis hit.

I spent most of my career in small business and just before taking this position had worked as co-founder and CMO of a startup.

On day one of my tenure about two and a half years ago, we implemented many of the remote-work best practices I learned in business to streamline and centralize communications. We use Slack for internal chat, had moved to G Suite for email and document sharing, and had moved our donor database online to a cloud solution. Timekeeping and payroll had recently moved online. We still

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use a desktop version of our bookkeeping software but had already created documented and auditable digital processes for payments and approvals. My bookkeeper only worked a couple of hours a week on-site before the pandemic and was able to easily transition to 100% work-from-home.

If you haven't already started transitioning to online bill pay and requiring your bills to come in digitally, I would recommend you start today. It takes quite a bit of time but is well worth the effort. Work with your finance committee and auditor to create processes that cover you legally and fit the needs of your organization.

Just weeks before the crisis we had replaced all desktop computers with laptops (purchased inexpensively through TechSoup's nonprofit hardware program), so the physical transition to remote work was very simple. The cultural and technical aspects of communi-

cating with a remote team were in the rearview mirror, so our team didn't miss a beat as most of us headed home.

After about a week of discussion, the team decided to take our 33rd annual spring native plant sale (our largest event and top fundraiser) online. We set up a delivery and curbside pick-up system that minimized risk for our staff and supporters. While we haven't yet hit our budgeted number, we've already sold over \$35,000 in native plants and we've given our supporters something fun to do at home.

3) Work with funders (and vendors) as partners

One of the smartest things to come out of our small crisis committee was the idea to approach funders as partners. With a script and plan vetted by this committee, I approached our largest funder. We had a six-figure grant fund

in the bank but earmarked for a specific project. We had spent very little of the money, as most of the construction and design would have happened this summer. While expressing my desire to complete the project at some point in the future, I made the case that we needed the funds released for general operations to get us through this crisis and not lose our talented staff. After all, the new nature playscape we're building would be useless if the whole organization went under. Our foundation representative agreed, took the idea back to his board, and we were able to release a month's worth of payroll from the grant fund. All of this happened before Congress had passed the PPP program, so we were able to keep 100% of our salaried staff on payroll.

We then went to some of our major individual donors and updated them on our plans, letting them know what we had been able to

A Great Blue Heron explores Reflection Riding.



accomplish so far. Several donors moved their usual year-end giving to April, and one even doubled their prior year's gift.

Being honest about our challenges and asking for advice worked well across the board. We even had a Zoom meeting with a foundation that had never funded us before. While we would have preferred the planned in-person meeting, we felt it was important to continue our outreach efforts and push forward with growing our awareness with funders. We do not expect funding from them in 2020 or perhaps even 2021, but we know it will be important to keep growing our pipeline.

Beyond funders, it's also worth negotiating with anyone you do business with on the vendor side as well. Asking for discounts, pushing contracts off for a couple of months, and negotiating lower

rates all help. We looked closely at our property and were able to make a few simple cuts like removing a few port-a-potties that were no longer necessary without visitors on-site. We shut off power at the breaker for several of our outdoor amenities to reduce passive power consumption. We're currently negotiating both general liability and worker's comp insurance because we have fewer risks while being closed to the public.

Don't forget your nonprofit partners in these discussions. You never know what ideas they may have to collaborate even in the pandemic. We used the time without any visitors to make energy-efficiency improvements that would have been difficult with the center full of children and visitors. A local green building nonprofit volunteered their labor force to complete the improvements at no charge to us.

They kept their staff busy and were able to easily socially distance on our large property. Since their program had already been funded by a grant, we helped them fulfill their grant requirements while keeping underserved people on the payroll.

Preparation pays off

While we're always to some degree preparing for the last disaster, that preparation work is critical and preparedness pays off in a crisis like this. I'm proud of my staff and board for maintaining a creative spirit and embracing the entrepreneur's mindset that we can solve this problem and survive the challenge as a stronger organization.

Since we live in a new world where everything changes every few days, I encourage you all to keep tabs on the [ANCA Google Group](#) and to continue sharing best practices and asking difficult questions. I've found it very useful as we've planned for our re-opening. With any luck, I'll be writing that summer camp article again someday soon. 🌿

Mark McKnight continues a lifelong passion for helping people connect with the outdoors as the President & CEO of [Reflection Riding Arboretum & Nature Center](#). Working from a 317-acre campus inside the city limits of Chattanooga, Tennessee, the nature center conserves land and wildlife while reconnecting Chattanoogaans with nature.



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Create Calm Out of Chaos: Nature-Based Practices to Lead Change Efforts in Your Organization

Nancy Patterson, Manager
BLM Campbell Creek Science Center — Anchorage, AK

AS LEADERS IN the nature center profession, one of our roles is to be a steady, calm presence for our staff, board, and community during times of chaos. But, how do you do that when the world you knew has turned upside down? Nature-based leadership practices can help you create the calm out of chaos your community desires.

Acknowledge It: Change Happens in an Instant. Transition Takes Time.

William Bridges, author of *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*, describes that change happens in an instant but transition takes time. People have to come to terms with change, even when the change is something they have wanted. This is inherently stressful.

CCSC staff works on their strategic plan with Dr. Corky McReynolds.



“You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face.”
– Eleanor Roosevelt

“Attitude is a little thing that makes a BIG difference.”
– Winston Churchill

As leaders, we often orchestrate changes that impact our staff, board, community, and customers. We develop strategic plans, adjust workloads, hire different employees, set visions for the future, identify and adjust mandates. While leaders have already transitioned

to the idea of change, staff is often left catching up to the new reality.

Change can also be unexpected. In these times, it is more important than ever to know how to create calm from a world that suddenly feels chaotic.

As servant leaders of learning- and growth-oriented organizations, we set the tone and approach that creates steadiness and direction for our teams. Fortunately, nature offers us a full spectrum of leadership tools to create calm out of chaos.

Name Your Emotions: Check Your Personal Weather Forecast

Your staff, board, and community take their emotional cues from you: the leader. You are the weather forecaster and the barometer of your organization. When the world feels chaotic and stormy, and the barometric pressure starts to fall, your team depends on you to model a calm demeanor and predict a sunny future. In other words, they want you to exhibit a predictable weather forecast (preferably 75 degrees and sunny) every day.

Neither weather nor emotions work this way. Both vary and both are normal. You are human. You feel a full spectrum of emotions.

Check in with yourself and ask, “What is my weather forecast



today?” Do you feel sunny? Blustery? Stormy? Rainy-cloudy-sunny-rainbowy-all-in-one-go? This is valuable insight. When you can name your emotions, you can then acknowledge and constructively handle them in order to restore your inner calm. The emotions weather forecast is also a gentle way to get a read on how others around you are feeling. Together, you can calm the storm.

Look Inward: At the Eye of the Storm, There is Calm

“When so much is swirling, it is more important than ever to go within.”

— Bob Schout, *PowerSkills*

Leadership development facilitator, Bob Schout, described the current situation as feeling like a hurricane. The world is changing, moving, and feels out of control. Yet, at the center of every hurricane is the eye of the storm. In the eye, there is calm.

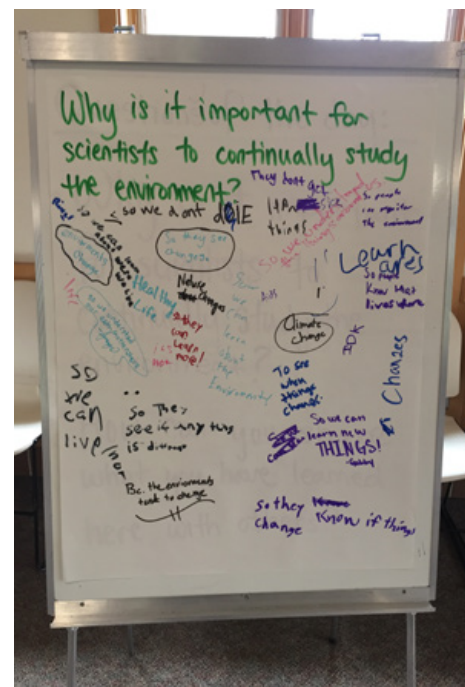
When relating to leadership skills, read eye as “I.” The eye is the inner sense of self. It relates to values and beliefs. When you look inside yourself, you can identify your inner truth, which guides direction: What am I feeling? How am I maintaining calm? What do I believe in and value?

Connecting to your inner sense of calm and connection helps you address changing circumstances that affect yourself, staff, and organization.

Set the Tone: Create simple mantras

Mantras are powerful tools to keep people focused and motivated. Here are two mantras I use at **Campbell Creek Science Center**: “Define Reality. Offer Hope.” “Be Positive and Proactive.”

These mantras remind me to define the state of a situation and to



Reflection strategies, such as gallery white board walls, help identify and check in on knowledge, emotions, and arising opportunities.

offer hope for the future. They set an intention for staff: to be positive and proactive.

Here’s an example: Just like the rest of the nature center community, the current situation impacts programming and budget. And, we believe in what we do: connecting our community to nature. We are prepared for this. We are already working through organizational change of a recently expanded mandate to provide environmental education throughout Alaska. We have an active strategic plan that lays out our vision and steps we are taking to make it come true. We can create meaningful resources that connect our community to public lands in different ways.

Remember Your Roots: Your Organization has a Mission and Guiding Principles

Close your eyes and visualize a tree that grows in the habitat of your nature center. That species of tree is uniquely adapted to your

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local environment. You and your organization are too. When leaders are called to create calm, remember your roots: your organization's mission and guiding principles. Your mission grounds you in the nature center's purpose. Your guiding principles define your organization's values. If true to your organization, these strong organizational roots will stabilize and steady you and your team.

Grow a Thick Trunk: Prepare and Plan

"It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don't keep your feet, there's no knowing where you might be swept off to."
— J.R.R. Tolkien

Trees grow new rings each year. Some years have immense growth between each ring, others may be barely perceptible. There are likely scars, blights, and threats that add stress and rich patterning to the trunk. Similarly, your nature center has experienced perceptible or imperceptible growth and change. It has weathered storms.

A way to manage the storm and take advantage of change is to prepare an inspiring vision and a plan to achieve it. Short-range strategic plans lay out a tangible vision with strategies and action steps to make a vision come true in a reasonable five- to seven-year timeline. Even if your organization does not have an active strategic plan, you likely have annual work plan goals that guide accomplishments each year. Plans are key in times of strain. They create stability, direction, and focus. When managed effectively,

the plans create benchmarks to strive towards and provide flexibility to take advantage of opportunities.

Reach out with your limbs!

As your organization grows and strengthens, it reaches out and spreads its limbs. New relationships form. Opportunities arise. Much of this comes from the careful stability you create as leader. When your team members feel supported and safe, they will go out on a limb and try something different. They will spread their feelings of support and inspiration to your community. Your community will notice, feel welcome, and seek out your nature center.

Chaos generates creativity, energy, and opportunities to change your nature center for the better. Out of the storm, you may find that an initiative you have tried to launch finally receives needed attention from those who have resisted. Or, your team solves challenges to serve your community in different ways. Or, you may have discovered a new way of thinking and looking at the world. You may find you have support in places you least expected it. A partnership arises out of a common interest.

Nature is Resilient

"That is one good thing about this world — there are always sure to be more springs."

— Lucy Maud Montgomery

The storm of change requires people and organizations to pivot rapidly. The change you experience now is just one storm of the many your nature center will face. You




CCSC Staff (from left) Nancy Patterson, Maddy Stokes, Autumn Young, Maia Draper-Reich, Julie Johnson, Brian Janson, Molly Larmie, Brad Fidel, Luise Woelflein, Eric Stuart, and Cynthia Silvis on the 2020 Iditarod Ceremonial Start Day. Photo Credit: Bureau of Land Management.

can stabilize and strengthen your team, center, and board to build organizational resilience. Creating calm out of chaos comes from the advanced work of staying grounded and present, forecasting the weather, building strong dependable teams, and growing an inspiring vision.

Everything in nature cycles. The moon waxes and wanes. The earth shifts from season to season as it travels around the sun. Storms pass through, changing landscapes, wildlife, and people.

Nature centers are attuned to these cycles. They invite the study of ecological succession. They establish a sense of place. They provide respite and relief in the knowledge that this, too, shall pass. The birds will return. The trees will grow. There are always sure to be more springs.

Nature is resilient, and so are we. 

Nancy Patterson is a conservation social scientist. She serves as the director of the [BLM Campbell Creek Science Center](#) in Anchorage, Alaska. Check out the Center's [Nature Learning Resources](#) for outdoor activities you can share with your community.

Indian Creek Nature Center Pivots to Virtual Plant Sale

Liz Zabel, Marketing Manager
Indian Creek Nature Center — Cedar Rapids, IA



WHEN FACED WITH the decision to close to the public in March due to the spreading COVID-19 pandemic, [Indian Creek Nature Center](#) officials knew that also meant canceling or postponing much of the Nature Center's programming and events — including the biggest fundraiser of the year, the 37th annual Maple Syrup Festival set for March 21 & 22.

Another huge fundraiser, the Spring Plant & Art Sale, was not far behind. Scheduled for May 2, it was clear a decision had to be made soon. Postponing this event was not an option due to the timeliness of the event — the concept of the annual Plant & Art Sale is to provide a shopping event right in time for spring gardening. Delaying would miss a crucial planting window. To cancel wasn't an ideal option either — plants had already been ordered, and having to cancel another large fundraiser would have been another big blow to the Nature Center.

So, that left one option: pivot. Along with the leadership team, ICNC's Event Coordinator Sarah Botkin and the Friends of Indian Creek Nature Center (the volunteer group who host the Plant & Art Sale as well as ICNC's holiday market, Nature's Noel every year) decided to move the sale online. This would be the first online sale of any kind for Indian Creek Nature Center, and it wouldn't be without its challenges, especially considering ICNC's staff is social distancing and working from home.

Here's how we managed it.

Step one: Planning, inventory and moving online.

First we had to determine what we could make available online. What inventory did we know we have and which vendors were still able to participate?

We collected information from vendors using Google Forms (plant name, size, photo if available and description). Many items did not have photos or descriptions, which

meant staff members had to gather this information for hundreds of plants. We had a team of five staff working on gathering this information and getting it onto our online shopping platform for 10 days.

Our platform had a few limitations, so we used our website to create a landing page to explain the event, how to access the sale and how to navigate the sale page.

Step two: Marketing

First we communicated through our regular channels (email newsletter, social media, website, press release, etc) that we were moving the Plant & Art Sale online.

A Facebook event was created to help promote the event (boosted with a limited advertising budget — we spent less than \$100), and more than 1,000 people marked themselves as "interested," giving us a direct line of communication with potential shoppers by posting in the event.

Coverage in the local paper also helped promote the event.

Step three: Trial and error.

Before going live with the sale, it was critical that we test the shopping experience. This way we were able to catch a few errors before going live with the sale and prepare the best we could.

Anticipating a potential wave of heavy traffic to our website, we also warned the hosting site that we needed to be prepared for hundreds of shoppers at once.

Step four: Go live.

On April 17, shopping went live. First at 8am for our members, and then at noon to the general public.

The first wave of member sales came at a reasonable pace, giving our team a chance to experience the shopping experience from the back end. Then, a surge of more than a hundred orders came within the first hour of the sale going live to the public at noon.

We experienced a few small hiccups, including issues with certain browsers not working, and had to troubleshoot these as they arose.

While orders were coming in, a small team managed questions via phone, email and social media while also working to confirm orders.

Most orders were placed within the first few hours of the sale, but continued until we closed sales at noon on May 2.

Step five: Order confirmation, fulfillment and pick-up procedure.

After closing sales and confirming all the orders (as well as issuing some refunds due to low inventory), Event Coordinator Sarah Botkin organized pick-up times (specific dates and time windows) for each order so that we could maintain safe social distancing for staff and shoppers. Botkin, along with a few other staff members

and volunteers, worked tirelessly behind the scenes fulfilling orders, while also maintaining social distancing to the best of their ability.

In the end, the Spring Plant & Art Sale brought in more than 600 individual orders this year, with over \$25,000 in sales. This not only included plants, art, and items from vendors, but also items from our Creekside Shop such as Maple Syrup, Honey, farm-fresh eggs from Etzel Sugar Grove Farm, jams

and more. We also gave shoppers the option to add a donation to their purchase, which brought in nearly \$4,000 from 197 shoppers.

If your staff is considering an online sale, here's our advice:

- Be as organized as possible up front. Allow reasonable time to gather information and upload photos (photos and descriptions help sell items).

All photos by Liz Zabel.



- Check in with your team often to make sure everyone is on the same page with expectations.
- Be prepared for any technological problems that may occur.
- Have a staff member on call each day to answer customer questions and troubleshoot problems.
- From Event Coordinator Sarah Botkin: “It is always the area that you anticipate having the least amount of problems that you end up having the most issues with. Pulling orders sounds easy enough, but when you have multiple ven-

dors with the same variety of plants, plants that have been labeled with a slight deviation of their name, and volunteers that are not familiar with the types of plants they are working with, attention to detail becomes extremely important! One effect of that is needing extra time when pulling over 600 orders. On the positive side, the people purchasing plants tend to be a bit more on the forgiving side when mistakes are made knowing that we are all going through a new and crazy time. They are grateful the event wasn't canceled and we found a way to make it happen.”

Quick transitions can still be successful

Pivoting the Plant & Art Sale online was certainly no easy feat, but our staff is incredibly proud of the event we managed to successfully pull off in a short matter of time!

p.s. The Spring Plant & Art Sale isn't the only ICNC event to go virtual. We've transitioned several programs online, including our Backyard Chickens Workshop, “What's The Buzz?” Beginning Beekeeping Workshop, [Preschool Trail Trekkers program](#) and more. 🌱



Liz Zabel is the Marketing Manager at [Indian Creek Nature Center](#), as well as a photographer, videographer and all-around storyteller. A former journalist, Liz joined the Nature Center staff in October 2018, where she proudly promotes ICNC's mission to create #championsofnature through environmental education, leadership in land protection and restoration, and encouraging responsible interaction with nature.

Dunes Learning Center Inspires Imagination in *The Search for Sandsquatch*

Mason Crist, Intern
Dunes Learning Center — Chesterton, IN

DUE TO THE CORONAVIRUS outbreak, [Dunes Learning Center](#) has suspended its education programs and transitioned to social media and online content to continue engaging and educating children about the natural world.

The organization's social media pages include nature craft tutorials, backyard nature walkthroughs and a new video series, [the Search for Sandsquatch](#), starring Dunes Learning Center's Chief Naturalist Anthony Escobedo on his hunt for the elusive "Sandsquatch."

"This is mainly for the kids; they are exposed to a lot right now," says Escobedo. "There is so much information about the pandemic out there, it is scary and a lot to take on. We want to provide an opportunity for kids to escape everything that is going on in the world and just be with the learning center in a fun, engaging environment."

The nine-part series follows Escobedo throughout the Indiana Dunes

National Park as he tracks the never-before-seen Sandsquatch, looking for the footprints, scat and clues it leaves behind.

"We wanted to create something that is entertaining and makes kids feel like they are exploring Dunes Learning Center. We want nature to continue playing a central role for our students, even with everything going on," says Escobedo.

"The series is a mix of fictional and non-fictional content. Kids learn best when they are engaged

and having fun, so we were sure to include something with a little adventure, a little mystery, a little education and a whole lot of fun," he adds. "Having a storyline to follow with these clues allows a real world to look for the viewers on how the different scientists, biologist, conservationists and naturalists utilize these same clues to gather information about the resources around them."

Discovery Charter School third grade teacher Shelly Williams

says that so far, the fictional storyline and cliffhangers are keeping the audience wondering and engaged.

"Being outdoors is very important for the kids to be able to explore and learn," she says. "These videos are goofy enough to keep the students entertained while they learn how to investigate and explore what is around them. Programs like these are fun, entertaining and provide kids with the tools they need to successfully explore



the outdoors. I have a few kids that really enjoy them and were curious about the cliffhanger [Escobedo] left in episode one.”

Escobedo hopes these videos motivate kids to get out of the house, into their backyards and appreciate the plant and animal life around them.

“We want to inspire students to get outside,” says Escobedo. “What can kids find in their backyards or where they live? They may not be looking for Sandsquatch, but they

can try and track some squirrels.”

Dunes Learning Center plans on keeping nature close to the community. New episodes of “The Search for Sandsquatch” will be posted every Tuesday on Dunes Learning Center’s [website](#) and [Facebook page](#).

Dunes Learning Center is a non-profit residential environmental education center and camp devoted to inspiring lasting curiosity and stewardship with nature, even in isolation. 🌿



Chief Naturalist Anthony Escobedo inspecting a salamander.

An advertisement for GW Architects. The top left features the logo 'GW ARCHITECTS' with 'G|W' over 'W|O'. The top right says 'THE NATURE PLACE Reading, PA'. The main image shows a modern building with wood and stone siding and large glass windows, situated on a hillside with trees. A person is walking on a wooden bridge in the foreground. At the bottom, a dark blue banner contains the text: 'GWWO STRIVES TO ENRICH THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE THROUGH RESPONSIBLE DESIGN THAT IS INSPIRATIONAL, EVOCATIVE, AND PROGRESSIVE.' Below this is the phone number '410.332.1009' and the website 'www.gwwoinc.com'.

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Huron County Nature Center Taps the Power of the Pen

Caitlin Stone-Webber, Naturalist
Huron County Nature Center — Huron County, MI

AS WITH MANY OTHER organizations, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic sent the team scrambling at [Huron County Nature Center](#). Scrambling to re-define who we were and how we could help. The first day our kids in Michigan were home, I sat at my computer for a long time trying to come up with the most impactful way to help kids. How could we encourage learning within their home? How could we help them adjust? How do we help them smile in a time that's confusing and scary?

Mail. Not email, not social media messages, but rather real mail delivered to their door. We put it out on Facebook. A simple post outlining a simple project. Kids write to me, the naturalist, about anything. They could think big or small, ask one question or many.

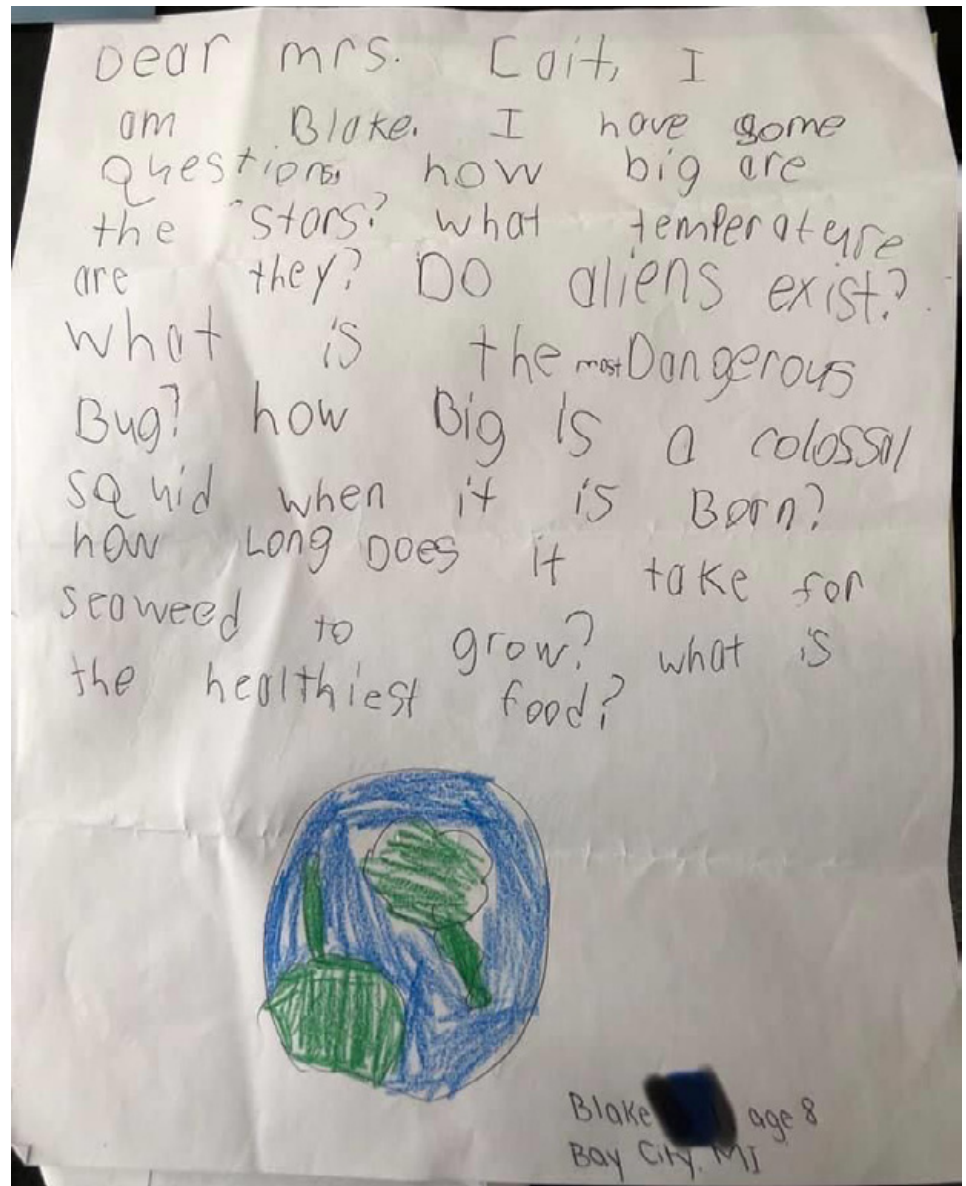
This project was meant to be small, a few letters that I would respond to by hand. We never expected the response we have gotten. That Facebook post alone has reached over 30,000 people in the weeks it has been up. I have just over 75 pen pals to-date, with letters coming from as far away as South Carolina and Oklahoma.

The letters have blown me away. I have two things that I absolutely love about being a naturalist at our Nature Center:

The first being the questions I receive from kids. The questions

we have gotten in our letters have been no exception. Big concepts from kids of all ages. It's not just acceptable that honey comes from honey bees, but rather *how* do they make it? They don't stop at

a giraffe's tongue is purple, they want to know *why* it is. They want to know if animals laugh or if they get sad and as scared as we do. They ask how they can help our planet with gardening or recycling



at home. Every letter has been challenging and thoughtful.

The second part I love is learning myself. Each letter I've received has taught me something. Things from worms to outer space. Their questions have been a teaching tool greater than any class I've ever taken. No matter how confident I am in the answer, I never respond to a letter without researching it first. This project has been as impactful to me as I'm hoping it is for our kids.

I've been told by parents that the letters have been instilling so much more at home. One little girl needed to be taught what a letter even was. It's been more than just their questions. They have been practicing good penmanship. They have been working on how to articulate their thoughts into the written word and format a real letter. Even bigger than that, they have been learning

how the United State Postal Service works. They are forming new appreciations to so many facets of their world.

Our hope is that this project carries on long after COVID-19. Our intentions are to not only continue to promote it online, but to bring it into our Center as well. I plan to add a small area for writing letters in our interpretive center. We will have paper available for kids to leave their questions along with their mailing address, and a small "mailbox" for them to drop them into. I will write letters as long as our children are asking questions.

Our pen pal project has grown far beyond our expectations.

My hope is to continue to build on this project; the anticipation, the opportunity for learning, and continued connections to nature through the written word. 🐦

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Chattahoochee Nature Center Hosts Blood Drive, Saves Lives

Alicia Evans, Community Programs Director
Chattahoochee Nature Center — Roswell, GA

IN MID-MARCH [Chattahoochee Nature Center](#) made the difficult decision to close to the public until further notice. While our grounds remained closed, our center managed to host a virtual native plant sale, a virtual birdseed sale, and even a virtual 5K! We also harvested 340lb of fresh produce from our Unity Garden, which then was donated to our local food pantry. We were proud to be able to accomplish these happenings while being closed (that kept us very busy!), and wanted to continue to show support for our community in other ways as well.

The idea of hosting a community blood drive at CNC had been one we were planning for in the future, but we had not yet made it a reality. The current situation presented the perfect opportunity to try it — a large empty parking lot, along with a very willing partner, [LifeSouth](#), our local blood drive organization, who was ready to come out and set up a mobile unit within a week of connecting with them.

LifeSouth states that “A sharp decline in donations is already being felt due to concerns about the virus. Blood donations are needed every day, and anyone who is in good health is encouraged to give.” Donations to LifeSouth directly support major hospitals in metro-Atlanta, including Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta, Emory Hospital, Emory Hospital, Grady Health System, Piedmont Atlanta

Hospital, and more.

Our community jumped at the opportunity to give! Blood donors included not only our staff, but also our docents, our members, and even members of the community who had never been to our center before. Some donors came out because they were looking for nearby centers to donate blood, while others thanked us for giving them a positive reason to get out of the house.

Kim Haikimian, our Partnerships Coordinator, came out to donate, and shared what participating meant to her. “My mom was a life-long blood donor. She even earned pins to recognize her regularity with which she donated blood.

Which is why, when my workplace, just two weeks after mom passed, announced it was doing a blood drive for the first time ever, I had to volunteer in her honor.”

I received a note today from LifeSouth — “With your help, up to 63 lives were saved! You deserve a pat on the back for that. You are making a difference in our community and we can’t tell you how appreciative we are to partner with you. I look forward to the next drive!”

Hosting the drive required minimal investment of our time, and the staff of LifeSouth were fantastic to work with. I would encourage any center to consider hosting a blood drive now, or anytime. Your community will thank you. 🧡

The author (left) and Tamara Kinmon, CNC Events Director.



(Virtual) Feet on the Ground

ANCA happenings around the world

WHILE ANCA WON'T SCHEDULE any in-person events until we can safely be together, we're developing a series of virtual opportunities for members. We began with Open Space-style **ANCA CONNECTS** meetings, which are now transitioning to be more subject-specific, like a Facilitated Discussion at the Summit. Keep an eye out for ANCA **CONNECTS** announcements, as we're continually adding to the calendar.

We also have been delighted with the multiple Zoom-based **campfire sing-alongs** that aren't quite the same as they would be at the ANCA Summit, but are a true joy and worthy of their own merit. Our thanks go to Ken Voorhis, Iain MacLeod, and Ray Yurkewycz for organizing these events, and to all of the performers who have shared their talents so far.

With the state of the world as it is, we'll continue to digitally serve the nature & environmental learning center field, and look forward to seeing your virtual face sometime soon. 🌿



ANCA staff on a recent Zoom meeting, when Events Coordinator Sarah Reding joined from her paradisiacal retreat.



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