

# directions



The journal of the Association of Nature Center Administrators

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RECYCLE THIS NEWSLETTER -  
GIVE IT TO A FRIEND**

## Mental Health & NATURE DEFICIT DISORDER

**Brent Evans  
LMSW-ACP**

**Co-Author *The Nature Center Book*  
Cibolo Conservancy  
Boerne, TX**

For thirty-five years I have been a mental health care provider for emotionally disturbing children - children who severely disturb their parents and others. Some have serious psychiatric disorders. But, some simply seem very unhappy, bored, lazy, irritable, and unmotivated. And, as a licensed clinical social worker, I am concluding that Richard Louv is right: a significant underlying problem in our society is the lack of play in nature.

Perhaps I am biased. I have had an avocation, too - nature centers. My wife, Carolyn, and I founded the Cibolo Nature Center 18 years ago,

and later wrote *The Nature Center Book* on how to start nature centers. I have mixed my work and play by creating numerous outdoor therapy programs. These experiences have provided important insight about helping children and families.

There is an all too common pattern I have seen in my counseling practice with troubled kids. I ask the parents, what does your child do with free time? "TV and computer." What about friends? "They are at school." What about playing outside? "They would rather be indoors, and frankly I would rather not have them roaming the streets." How much do they sit in front of a screen? "Whenever they are home from school." You mean for hours and hours? "Oh yeah, they love it. Sometimes a friend comes over and

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*"The clearest way into the universe is through a forest wilderness."  
—John Muir*

ANCA is a private, non-profit organization, dedicated to promoting and supporting best leadership and management practices for nature and environmental learning centers.

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SUMMER 2007

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# President's Message

**Tim Sandsmark**  
**Executive Director**  
**Lookout Mountain Nature**  
**Center, Golden, CO**



## Changing of the Guard:

By the time you receive this, my two-year term as the President of the ANCA Board of Directors will be nearly completed. I'll be remaining on the Board for another year in an Ex-Officio position and am very pleased and honored to do so.

I will be turning over the reigns to a very capable new President, Bo Glover, Executive Director of the Environmental Nature Center in Newport Beach, CA. Bo has been on the Board since 2001 and has been serving as the Vice President of Professional Services, which is the Board member responsible for Peer Consults. During Bo's tenure in this position we have had a record number of consults, which has been very satisfying for a number of reasons. For any of you who have been a recipient of a consult you know how extremely valuable they can be. For those of you who have served on a consult team, I'm sure you have found it an invaluable and rewarding experience.

**If you have an interest** in having a consult for your organization or in sharing your expertise as a member of consult team, please contact our new Vice President of Professional Services, Ann Rilling at rlazys@hughes.net or 970-375-7090. We're thankful and excited to have Ann in this new position, as she will do an excellent job as our new "consult guru."

All of my time on the Board has been very rewarding and action-packed and the last two years as President has been no exception. It has been a great privilege to work with such a phenomenal group of Board members who are very dedicated, hard

working, and selfless in their efforts to help our profession.

Many significant actions for ANCA have occurred recently including the reprinting of the *Directors Guide to Best Practices*, the publishing of our first four Monographs, development of an on-line salary survey as well as other positive developments. However probably one of the most significant activities is the hiring of our first Executive Director!

**After an extensive Search and Screen process, I am very pleased to announce that Jen Levy of Logan, Utah will become ANCA's first Executive Director! She will officially begin her duties on May 21.**

Many of you know Jen because she has been an active ANCA member since 1998 and has attended many ANCA Summits. Her nature center experience includes seven years as the Executive Director of Stokes Nature Center in Logan, UT and Director of Operations at the Gore Range Natural Science School Avon, CO. She was involved at Stokes since its inception and helped build the programs, policies, procedures, staff, community relationships, and budget from the ground up while leading the strategic direction of the organization.

Academically, Jen has an MS degree in Recreation Resource Management from Utah State University and a BS degree in Wildlife Management from the University of Maine. She is also a graduate of the Professional Residency in Environmental Education graduate education program at the Teton Science Schools in Wyoming.

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Jen plans to work out of Logan, UT so the ANCA office will relocate to this area. As you may know, Aullwood Audubon Center in Dayton, OH has been the administrative headquarters for ANCA since 1995 and since 2001 has been operating with an annual contract with ANCA to fulfill certain tasks related to the operation of the organization. Larry Brown under the direction of Aullwood Executive Director, Charity Krueger, has served as our "official" ANCA support staff during this period. We are appreciative of the work he has done for ANCA during this time. Jen will work with Larry to ensure a smooth transition of the ANCA office from Ohio to Utah.

We believe that Jen has the right blend of skills, experiences, education, enthusiasm and passion for the profession to lead ANCA to its next level. Please join us in welcoming Jen to her new position and share in our excitement as ANCA's makes this important step in our evolution as a professional organization serving you. Also join us in thanking Larry and Charity for their dedication and work for ANCA over these past few years.

A special thanks to ED search committee chair, Corky McReynolds for his leadership throughout the process, to fellow search committee members Pat Welch, Bo Glover, and Saul Weisburg for their hard work and insight, and to the ANCA Board for their help in the selection process. We had an excellent pool of candidates and wish to thank them for all their interest and time.

It has been a great honor to serve as your President and I am glad to continue to serve you and the profession on the ANCA Board. Please join me in welcoming Bo Glover as ANCA's new President. As always keep up the important work you do and thanks for your belief and support of ANCA!

I look forward to seeing you at this year's Summit in August in Milwaukee, WI. Visit [www.natctr.org](http://www.natctr.org) for registration information. 🌿

# director's notes

**Jen Levy**  
**Executive Director**  
**Association of Nature Center**  
**Administrators, Logan, UT**



## Looking to the Future:

I am very excited about my new role as Executive Director of ANCA. I have been a member of this fine organization for the past nine years and have benefited tremendously from ANCA's the programs and services ANCA and from the incredible network of nature center administrators who are members.

Like many of you, I felt overwhelmed when I became director of my nature center and wondered how I ended up as an administrator. My education background did not include course work in fund development, personnel management, or building maintenance. Luckily, a colleague introduced me to ANCA and I attended my first Summit in Tennessee in 1998 - I had been on the job for only two months. As soon as I met my first fellow Summit attendee, my education in nature center administration began and I knew I found exactly what I needed to be successful at my job. I still have my

notes from that Summit and I refer back to them on occasion. I created a "to do" list on the return flight for my first year on the job that included more than 20 items that ranged from building an endowment to changing our public hours. Did I accomplish everything that first year? No, but I finally had a plan and many new friends and colleagues to call with questions.

I look forward to my first year with ANCA. I am grateful to the ANCA Board for their hard work and support and to Charity Krueger and Larry Brown at Aullwood Audubon Center for providing the administrative services for ANCA for the past several years. I also look forward to getting to know the ANCA membership and learning how ANCA can help you and your nature center. 🌿

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## Mental Health

(continued from page 1)

they do it together.” This is not all the children I see, but it is well over half. This is not OK.

As a mental health professional, I have enjoyed Louv’s coining of the phrase “Nature Deficit Disorder.” Of course, he was not claiming that all childhood depression, anxiety, attention problems, or oppositional behavior are directly caused by separation from nature. Louv **has** presented ample evidence that those who sequester themselves into the indoor world do lose something profoundly important, and can react with self-absorption, boredom, anger, and lack of compassion. As Naomi Schalit put it, “staying inside too much can indeed do weird things to people, simply because it puts us in a context where our existence is the primary reference point. We become the center of our human-made worlds.”

Psychiatric symptoms are known to be exacerbated when basic human needs are not met. And, counselors are keenly aware of how oblivious people can be to the issues that are demoralizing them. The quiet indoor migration has been occurring over the last several generations. Even in the early days of atomic bomb testing, the Atomic Energy Commission was reporting that the average American spent 95% of their lives indoors.

Children now spend so much time in home, school, or organized recreation that child development experts are concerned. A recent report from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) says “free and unstructured play is healthy and - in fact - essential for helping children reach important social, emotional, and cognitive developmental milestones as well as helping them manage stress and become resilient.” Our kids need to get outside and play.

However, we should be cautious not to romanticize childhoods of the past, or confuse “unstructured play” with “unsupervised play”. When children are left to their own devices, they do not necessarily make good or safe choices.

I loved my childhood experience of freedom to take off from the house and come back at dark. But, let’s not pretend that we can go back to that world. There are many neighborhoods where this approach would lead to disaster.

**Unstructured play can be healthy.** Unsupervised play in public parks can result in *Lord of the Flies* situations and great damage to parks and kids. Different populations of children have different needs when it comes to recreation, be it exercise, socialization, inquiry learning, etc. Before we redesign our centers to accommodate outdoor play, let us look at *who* will be making the plans. Involve child



photo courtesy of Schlitz Audubon Nature Preschool

*Getting outside and into nature is important for children’s psychological as well as physical well being.*

development experts, teachers, and social workers who are familiar with the local populations of children. These folks can help with how much structure/supervision is too much, or not enough. They know tricks of the trade. Professional camp directors and residential nature center directors would also be good consultants for designing play experiences. In this regard, read David Sobel’s *Place-Based Education: Connecting Classrooms & Communities*.

**At this moment** there are well trained out-door educators and talented youth workers who cannot find work in their chosen fields, because parents and school districts and even

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nature centers often do not recognize the need with funded positions. The National Outdoors Leadership School has been graduating thousands of enthusiastic trainees, who just need a chance to use their training. Prescott College turns out scores of graduates in environmental science and adventure education every year. We have the people who know how to do the work. They just need funded positions in a culture that has forgotten about children's need to connect with the natural world.

Experienced youth workers know how to diffuse trouble, how to redirect attention, how resolve conflicts, and how to help kids find fun options for all their enthusiasm. This supervision can simply be oversight until trouble brews, but knowing what to do when things "go south" is vital, or the whole experience can be ruined.

Children with impulse problems do in fact become more impulsive as the structure gets looser, so having a knowledgeable adult on hand is wise. I am not suggesting tight structure for the kids, who get plenty of that at school. But, experienced oversight provides intervention and teaching as needed.

Position "free play zones" in open and observable spots near your visitor center. Parents don't necessarily know how to protect your park from their children, or the children from the park, or children from children.

The American Journal of Public Health reports that spending time in parks, farms or grassy backyards reduces symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). However, to suggest that ADHD is the result of the divorce from nature is not supported by the research, while genetics have been directly linked. It is likely that problems associated with ADHD (and other childhood disorders) are exacerbated by deprivation from

the natural world. I would advise careful interpretation here. I have heard some suggest that parents just take their kids off medication and get them outside more. But, I never hear this from the professionals who work directly with these families and

understand the daily discouragement that results from extreme impulsivity and the resulting social penalties these kids face.

### Play is the work of children.

There is an instinctive curiosity in children to explore the natural world. Work in nature is also valuable: "service learning." My experience with adolescents in psychiatric hospitals was that volunteering at local parks was more therapeutic than standard psychotherapy. When kids work on conservation projects and feel their own worth, they are less obsessed with personal frustrations.

It is a lot more likely that kids will go outside and play if the parents do. Parents who spend time outside can create the atmosphere for adventure, or drudgery, or fun, or drama. Parents can join with friends to create outdoor play cooperatives, have cool backyards, and go on field trips to places of adventure, which might even include vacant lots and ditches.

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photo courtesy of Schlitz Audubon Nature Preschool

"Working" hard in the backyard collecting worms and having a great time!



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# Profiles: Nature Preschools

## A PROMISING DIRECTION FOR ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

**Ken Finch**  
**President/Founder**  
**Greenhearts, INC**  
**Omaha, NE**

The most distinctive component in Green Hearts' strategic planning is our intent to create a multi-state network of nature preschools. This unique approach to fostering a "culture of conservation" generates a common response from most people: "What's that?"

The basic concept of a nature preschool is quite simple: it's a licensed preschool that is located in a natural area where the students explore, discover, and play daily. Like most preschools, it serves three to five year-old children in half-day sessions. They are registered and pay tuition on a yearly schedule and — depending upon the parents' wishes — attend for two to five days per week, throughout the nine-month school year.

Nature preschools are few but not new; they have existed for at least forty years. Today there are about a dozen in the United States that are operated by nature centers, and numerous others that incorporate some of the same elements. But no organization has developed a network of these extraordinary facilities that would bring their great experiences to young children across the country.

The outdoors is the key to the singular approach of nature preschools. The students go outside every day, exploring their schools' multiple acres of habitats in any weather that isn't actually dangerous. "There's no such thing as bad

weather," goes the refrain, "only bad clothing." Nature preschoolers get muddy, wet, warm, cold, tired, covered in leaves and sticky seeds, and most of all, exhilarated. Along the way, they fall in love with nature. With the aid of spare sets of clothes and well-informed parents, the daily nature explorations become a much-loved and memorable part of the students' development. And therein lays the great

importance of nature preschools.

The frequent, relatively unstructured, child-centered outdoor activities of a nature preschool are a near-perfect prescription for two crucial needs: creation of lasting personal bonds with nature, and the healthy development of young children.

Multiple studies have identified frequent childhood free play in natural areas as the greatest influence on the development of adult conservation values. Such play was once a common and cherished part of childhood: building

tree houses, digging holes to China, rolling in leaf piles, catching frogs and butterflies, and daydreaming in secret little hideaways. Sadly, such play is now rare. However, "nature play" is still a daily joy in nature preschools, where children can explore and play outdoors under the watchful eyes and gentle facilitation of trained teachers. A child attending a nature preschool for two years will enjoy hundreds of hours of direct contact with nature — most likely more than they will gain in all their subsequent years of education, combined!



photo by Bob Bailie

*Come rain, or shine, or mud puddles students at Schiltz Adubon Nature Preschool explore the great outdoors.*

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While almost perfectly replicating the outdoor play that is so influential on conservation values, nature preschools are also an exceptional fit with the developmental needs of young children. They use a “whole child” focus that rejects an early emphasis on academics in favor of a more balanced philosophy that supports the cognitive, physical, creative, emotional, and social development of children.

Nature preschools offer ideal settings for this goal. Their sensory-rich, constantly changing outdoor environments are treasure troves of experiential learning, inquiry, imagination, and wonder. The children’s daily outdoor adventures combine with nature-themed indoor activities to stimulate a full range of developmental needs. This age-appropriate approach helps the students grow into healthy, inquisitive children who have the self-confidence and practiced social skills needed for school readiness.

Nature preschools also have an unusual strength within the nonprofit sector: they can be financially self-supporting once the facilities are constructed and open. They work on a proven business model, using tuition payments to fund their on-going operations – just as most other types of preschools do. Green Hearts’ future preschools will also offer scholarship funds in order to ensure that our nature preschools can serve families who might not otherwise be able to afford them. Further, our preschool facilities will host a variety of play-based nature activities for young children and their families on weekends and during the summer months.

As a conservation organization, Green Hearts’ ultimate goal is to change the world, to make it a little better place for today and tomorrow. According to Green Hearts President Ken Finch, “The beauty of the preschool model is that it has been shown to create lasting impacts on values and beliefs. That’s our work: generating life-long conservation values that will guide adult conservation behavior.” 🍃

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photo by Bob Bailie

*Tots connect to the natural world indoors as well as outside at nature preschools.*

## PRESCHOOLS IN A NUTSHELL

The Schlitz Audubon Nature Preschool (SANP) is one of a growing number of nature preschools at nature centers around the country. The first of its kind in Wisconsin, and within National Audubon, SANP has been operating for four years. Children 3-5 years old come two, three, or four half days per week for an entire school year. The preschool is licensed through the state of Wisconsin and is taught by early childhood educators and environmental educators. The children spend at least half of their class time outdoors on the 185 acres of the Schlitz Audubon Nature Center in diverse habitats of forest, prairie, and wetlands. Situated on the shores of Lake Michigan, children have opportunities to explore the natural world connecting positively to nature through these repeat visits. Nature is also a wonderful vehicle for children’s development as children develop physically while hiking on the trails and acquire observation skills, critical thinking, and lasting friendships.

Through tours, photos, and stories, the preschool staff will showcase the Schlitz Audubon Nature Preschool at the preschool session “Nature Preschools in a Nutshell” at the ANCA Summit in August and provide an overview of how a nature preschool operates as part of a nature center.

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## Mental Health

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Example: back in the day my Dad helped us build a fort/playhouse in the backyard against the garage. Just plywood and two by fours. It was great. Two stories high, with windows and ladders. The whole neighborhood came over, and for years our backyard was the place to be. We would modify the playhouse and play imaginary games, act out the movies we saw at the theater, and have tremendous dramas. We climbed trees for hours. We got splinters and bruises, and teased each other, and ran and ran and ran. This is part of the solution for parents. Make your backyard the place to be. Mom was happy because she knew where her kids were, and could **keep an eye on us**. We were happy because our friends wanted to come over to our house.

I am very encouraged about the dialogue occurring at nature centers, and good ideas are emerging. My experiences in outdoor therapy programs have taught me that group dynamics with children can be wonderful or horrible. As the elders, it is up to us to provide enough oversight and fun so that time in nature is in fact good time. 🍁

## Bird Conservation Through Education

The Council for Environmental Education (CEE) and Flying WILD recently hosted *Bird Conservation Through Education: A National Gathering*, a conference intended to provide a forum for leaders in bird conservation and education to come together to discuss the present and future of bird conservation education on a national scale. The conference, held February 5-8, 2007 at The Crossings in Austin, Texas, drew 155 participants from an unprecedented 106 organizations, making it the largest and most diverse gathering of bird education provider groups in history.

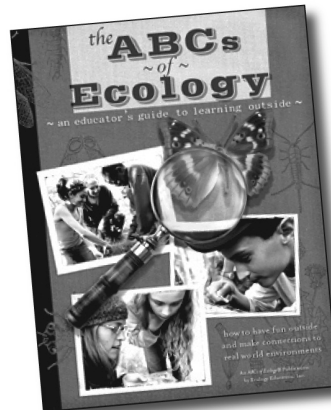
To build upon the momentum established during the conference, many participants plan to participate in a national bird education working group to develop a national plan to guide the direction of bird conservation education into the future. Many also plan to reconvene during the upcoming International Partners in Flight Conference, scheduled for February 13-16, 2008, in McAllen, Texas.

For more information, contact:

Marc LeFebre, Josetta Hawthorne at  
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# Put Your Best Foot Forward

David Junkin

Texas Master Naturalist and Hawk Counter  
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Having trails to explore nature on your preserve are the essential attractions for many visitors. Do you walk the trails of your property regularly? At least once per week?

While visiting many natural areas with developed trails, I have found that the majority are well maintained and safe. The main interest of visits to outdoor areas is to explore for natural features including wildlife.

Many of us visit sanctuaries where the trails and signage show neglect. From government maintained areas to small private sanctuaries, it is obvious when the management spends most of its time in the office and very little care is given to the area away from the headquarters. This leads to trouble for the trail user. Trees across trails; places where

one must get wet and muddy to proceed; shrubbery closing the trail, even thorny bushes that attack passers by; holes to fall into; stumps and roots that are exposed; widow makers; hazards that could be corrected; places where children are unsafe. Often the public will report on hazards, if you make it easy for them to do it. A simple "suggestion box" or comments sign-in-sheet, strategically located, will help you keep abreast of problems.

Perhaps your lands have extensive trails. Volunteers, with a little training as to what to look for in terms of safety are a great resource for maintaining byways. Staff, though often overwhelmed with urgent tasks, find the chance to "get out" regularly a long lost joy. Personnel, on the trail, are often a boon to visitors with questions or observations to share.

Walking your trails, say once a week, with an eye toward what will please the visitor will allow staff to deal with any problems before your center's reputation suffers. 🌿

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To learn more about Flying WILD and Flying WILD partnerships, please contact us or visit our website at [www.flyingwild.org](http://www.flyingwild.org).

Marc LeFebre  
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