

Winnetka group celebrates 10 years of nature education



Greta Dunne (left) and Noel Knight get active with their tree removal project.

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Founded in 2007, BackYard Nature Center set out with a mission to help children and adults foster nature in New Trier Township. Ten years later, in the age of accessible technology, the charge rings truer than ever.

The Winnetka-based nonprofit is led by founder and president Daniel Kielson, along with a five-member board of directors, one part-time staff member and myriad volunteers.

“[Our] mission is very simple: to connect children and adults with the wonders of nature, focusing on New Trier Township,” veteran board member [John Levine](#) said. “We look around us and there are, in fact, wonders if we just take time to look and listen and enjoy.”

[Levine](#) stressed that conservation and environmental activism are possible for those interested, even at the local North Shore level.

“I had this kind of epiphany that conservation is not just something that happens in the Amazon rainforest,” [Levine](#) said. “There are things even in our own backyard that are going on that people can get involved with, whether it’s enjoying the outdoors and wildlife in the environment or getting involved, like I wanted to do.”

BackYard Nature Center coordinates habitat restoration projects, education programming and outdoor nature activities throughout the village. To date, the organization has worked with

hundreds of community members across 30 organizations and nine schools. Most recently, they partnered with Sunset Ridge School for a nature hike and day of habitat restoration, which included the removal of non-indigenous species such as buckthorn.

For school-based sessions, BackYard Nature Center works with their internal team — among them a retired science teacher — to curate a program that is simultaneously educational and enjoyable.

“It’s a very hands-on experience which brings some of the things that they’re learning in the classroom to life for them,” Levine said. “We’ve found through similar exercises with kids that it really helps drive some of these learning principles home and makes it very interesting for them.”

Sunset Ridge teacher Nicole Johnston, who helped organize the latest event, echoed the idea that the nature center is a valuable supplement to textbook learning.

“The BackYard Nature Center is a great resource for the North Shore,” Johnston said. “The educational programs can be tailored to accommodate the needs of the students and teachers in order to fit curricular need.”

Johnston added kids seem to very much enjoy the center’s programs and are captivated by the manual work.

“We set our trip up so that we had a service project for the first half of the day, removing invasive species, and the kids surprised themselves with the trees they were able to cut down and work together to really help out the Skokie Lagoons area and the Forest Preserve by removing some of those invasive trees,” she said.

Beyond the classroom, BackYard Nature Center offers student internships and monthly service days at the Skokie Lagoons. Adults can also become active volunteers via marking, reclamation and teaching opportunities

“By forging that connection with nature, I think it really does kindle a sense of wonder and appreciation for what we have here at the Lagoons, at local parks [and] even just out [our] own back door,” Levine said. “We’re so wired to our computers [and] our cellphones. Screen time absorbs such a huge portion of kids’ lives. There are so many benefits both in terms of [their] enjoyment but also what has been shown to improve kids’ thinking skills, stimulating creativity — that sense of curiosity and exploration and discovery.”

For more information about the BackYard Nature Center, visit backyardnaturecenter.org.