

Frank Dietz column for March 2025: Youth can soar in nature!

In the mid-60's my beloved launched her teaching adventure with young children. While she completed signing professional documents with the principal, I wandered about outside. A distinct feature at that school on the bluff of the Mississippi River was a wooded corner of the playground area. It was an unusually spacious parcel. I learned later from the grandson of the farmer that offered the school's parcel that his granddad insisted on deeding that wooded corner with the rest of the school property "so the children would have a little woods to explore." And, how the children did such explorations. When I provided teacher taxi service, kids poking in and out of the wooded space were apparent. In fact, some tiny woodland creatures made their way from their home space into the first-grade classroom where the class Christmas tree garland of popcorn and cranberries invited yummy mischief. If only cameras were more readily available back then!

When we began to settle into our Comal "contemporary barn" with wooded areas in select parts of the surrounding pastures, I took up my walking stick, from one of the cedars and organized regular exploratory hikes for grandkids and grand nieces and nephews. The young ones found so much to take note of micro and macro. There were oaks with friendly lookout limbs to climb. In one secluded corner were the skeletal remains of a very large cow. Those were not cleared and what fun we had imagining what a hip or other joint or jawbone might have belonged to when it roamed. Oh, how the young can explore, discover, imagine and create in such a circumstance!

Just consider how enhanced outdoor discovery time might be if our area schools, provided a place to explore and catalog all sorts of liveliness. How might we encourage small naturalized areas to remain as a school is designed and sited.

In Texas we have a Children in Nature Network. Our Texas Hill Country now has a chapter that has gotten to work promoting the many benefits of outdoor education opportunities. Those joining together are helping address what Richard Louv describes in his *Last Child in the Woods* as our alarming "nature deficit disorder" so widespread among our young children and youth.

You and our neighbors can join the exciting conversation when Comal Conservation convenes on 11 March 6pm at McKenna Center for a Community Program hosting Texas leader Sarah Coles. Sarah will assist us in addressing "the disconnect children have with nature." We'll consider how connecting our young with nature can have an impact on their health and wellbeing. We can discuss with her how to enhance exploration, discovery and arouse the young imaginations toward new adventures in learning. Bring your questions, ideas, and look for ways to collaborate here in New Braunfels, Comal County and our Hill Country region. Let's make it a memorable evening opening vistas for future efforts.

I can attest for you how impactful a little outdoor adventuring can have going forward. One of my spouse's early students and the grandson of the donor of the parcel of the wooded addition to the schoolyard returned from a promising job in Houston to lead a foundation pursuing youth outdoor educational opportunities. Among our grands and their cousins emerge students selecting courses, sometimes outside their major, with an emphasis on a facet of land restoration, outdoor learning and summer jobs. Others prepare more specifically inspired by conservation for our future.

What might you add to the upcoming dreaming and discussion?