



LIFE ITSELF:

How an intrepid group of educators

EDUCATIONAL

created a loving and resilient

ROOTS AMID

outdoor learning community

GLOBAL

during the pandemic.

UNCERTAINTY

EDITED BY REGAN EBERHART

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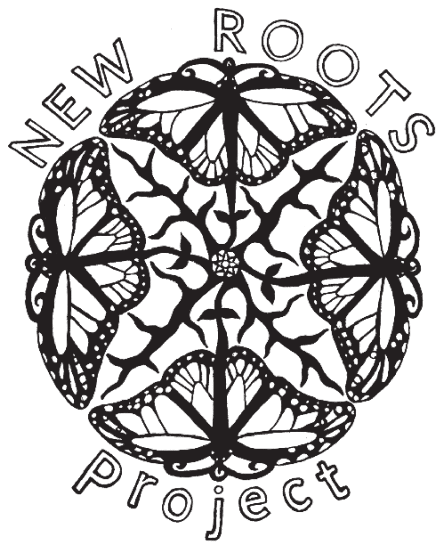
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The New Roots Project—A Recipe

Ingredients

- School-age children from 80 families
- Seven educators who are Renaissance people
- Two passionate leaders of a nonprofit
- Numerous volunteers from families in the Willowell Foundation programs
- One 20-foot yurt constructed by educators and their families
- One 30-foot yurt constructed by educators and youth
- One 15-foot yurt constructed by Willowell builders
- One wild-edible food path planted by educators, AmeriCorps, and youth
- One New Roots vegetable and flower garden donated and planted by youth
- One federal-state grant for pandemic relief
- One New Perennials Project grant

Directions

- Begin by sorting the children into three groups
 - Chickadees (years 5–7)
 - Wolf Pack (years 8–10)
 - Camp Artemis (years 11–15)

Blend together with creativity and joy, using tools found in the woods and fields and drawing from every dollop of your life experience and knowledge. Slowly warm the mixture and maintain the warmth with passion and purpose. Observe the result for cohesion and elasticity. Listen to the youth, being mindful of the lessons emerging. Curiosity, cooperation, and discovery should become visible. Gently incorporate until all ingredients become one—the New Roots Community, where children find a safe place for exploration, growth, and belonging during one of the most perilous eras of our times.

Editor's Note

Many years ago, my daughter casually announced that she would be spending her senior year of high school outdoors, in a program called the Walden Project run by the Willowell Foundation. Although affiliated with the local high school, the Walden Project seemed to have little in common with it—other than the students who enrolled.

I still remember my confusion: Outdoors? “Yes,” she said. All year? “Yes,” she said. I inquired where the building was. “There isn’t one,” she answered. “What do you do when it snows?” I asked. She shrugged as if it didn’t matter, and I recall thinking that this experiment wouldn’t last long.

Six years later, my college-bound son made the same announcement. “Is there a building?” I asked hopefully. There wasn’t. “We make campfires and pots of soup that we share,” he replied as if that explained everything.

I watched in astonishment as both of my children not only mastered the required academic subjects but also developed deep independence, reverence for the natural world, intellectual heft, and close and abiding bonds with their classmates.

It’s not surprising, then, that years later during the Covid pandemic, my daughter would announce that her elementary-school-aged children were enrolling in an outdoor program called New Roots created by the same educators who founded the Walden Project. “Is there a building?” I asked again. This time, the answer was yes—three yurts.

The pandemic had severely disrupted children’s lives, as they began homeschooling, remote learning, non-playing dates, incessant sanitizing, and existing within one’s pod. New Roots seemed like a miracle. School would be in the fields and woods where play was possible, and learning would be intrinsic, fluid, and truth-seeking.

All the children I know who have attended New Roots have been profoundly impacted in ways that would be difficult or impossible in a school within walls. The knowledge—and wisdom—they have gained will stay with them for life.

I was honored and delighted when I was asked to edit this book filled with stories about the program’s first days, the planning, the leaps of faith, and the unexpected landings. The book chronicles the path New Roots faculty, staff, and

parents blazed to create and nourish an exemplary learning environment. It reflects the brilliant creativity and dedication they brought together to transform the children, the community, and our world.

New Roots has demonstrated that ingenious, outside-the-box possibilities can be realized. Anyone interested in how young children learn will find novel ideas, maybe audacious ones, here. Anyone who has contemplated starting an alternative school or special program rooted in nature will find encouragement. And all of us who are inspired by “can-do” challenges will enjoy reading about how a disparate group achieved a big idea—quickly.

The plucky people who worked so hard creating New Roots also put in yeomen’s efforts to tell their stories for this book. We would like to express our deepest appreciation to Tasha Ball, who was among the first to imagine the school; to Matthew Schlein, the creator behind Willowell and Walden from the beginning; to Meghan Rigali, founding core teacher, artist, and wilderness instructor of extraordinary compassion.

We would also like to extend our deepest gratitude to founding teachers Casey Burger, Ethan Mitchell, Eric Warren, and Cory Hayes, whose resilience and creative problem-solving are well illustrated in their writing; to teachers from AmeriCorps Ian Gramling and Addison Tate, whose vibrant energy is contagious and joyful; and to visiting artist Gabrielle Schlein, whose work sparked growth that continues to this day. We also extend our heartfelt thanks to Caetlin Harwood and Elizabeth Davidson, parents of New Roots students, for fearlessly sharing the effect the program had on their children and families.

There wouldn’t be a book at all without designer Paul Dahm’s patient guidance and artful talent helping to shape a work we hope will endure, and New Perennials director Bill Vitek who steadfastly shepherded the project forward. Thank you, Paul and Bill.

Finally, we wish to acknowledge and thank the children who remind us every day about what really matters in life, and the community members, parents, and educators who pitched in to help New Roots grow at the beginning, and ever since.

CHAPTER 1

Answering an Unprecedented Challenge

By Matthew Schlein, Founder of the Walden Project and the Willowell Foundation

“Live in each season as it passes, breathe the air, drink the drink, taste the fruit and resign yourself to the influence of the Earth.”

—Henry David Thoreau

For the last 21 years, I have applied Thoreau’s experiment of “living deliberately” to the public schools of Vergennes, Vermont. Forgoing the fluorescent lights and climate-controlled environment, as well as the many friends, colleagues, and resources in the school building, I use the fields, mountains, and streets of Vermont as my classroom for the 18–20 heterogeneous students in grades 10–12 who sign up for the Walden Project each year. Gathered around a fire circle in a cedar grove on the 220-acre tract of land that is the Willowell reserve, I work to foster a transformation of each student’s education—from a predictable and quotidian affair to a stimulating adventure that speaks to their particular style as learners. Meeting outside, regardless of the weather, I let the colors of fall, the winter winds, and the bursting forth of buds in spring provide context for conversations.

Our interdisciplinary curriculum—steeped in philosophy, environmental studies, literature, and the social sciences—is anchored in core questions around one’s relationship to self, society, and nature, and includes requirements involving analysis, research, reflection, and creativity. In the end, however, nature proves the master teacher because the experience of being in the woods allows multiple avenues for expressing learning, wonder, and awe.

Inevitably, when discussing this approach, questions arise like, “Are we out in the woods all winter?” (Yes.) “Do we get cold?” (Yes.) “Is this part of the public schools?” (Yes.) Some immediately become captivated by this approach; others raise skeptical eyebrows.

On the whole, looking at both qualitative and quantitative data, this skepticism proves unwarranted. As an experiment in pedagogy, the Walden Project proves hugely beneficial. A recent survey sent to Walden Project graduates reported that 100 percent of former students improved their relationship to nature. Comments included, “Honestly, I was heavily depressed and spent most of my time alone and inside before Walden. Now, I love the outdoors and have a better relationship with society. I still struggle with depression, but I have a better perspective on life and myself.” Another student wrote, “It is hard not to become closer to nature when you spend almost every day outdoors. The experience helped me find peace through outdoor classrooms and meditation. I learned to be comfortable with my own company. My outlook on society, whether large or small, was wildly changed.” One hundred percent of former students also said they would recommend this program to family or friends, as Walden created the foreground for personal and academic growth.

These results do not seem surprising based upon my personal observation of hundreds of students. The scholarly literature supports this notion further if one simply enters the subject “benefits of nature” into a scholarly search engine: Cooley (2015), to Hartig et. al (2014), to Richardson and Richardson (2020), to Hinds and Camic (2020) provide a sampling of nature’s salubrious impact. The work itself falls within a framework first pioneered by John Dewey and later Paulo Friere and resonates within a larger body of education that might be seen as both emergent and perennial.

Listening to Each Other

This curriculum provides students with license to own their educations. It gives them context to see themselves as part of a symbiotic network. Instead of being ontologically reductive, we try to be interdisciplinary and holistic—encouraging student choice, fostering original expressions of learning. Our approach helps them follow their curiosity, whether to Africa and Europe, to the shores of northern Canada with the Cree people, or to the many places between and beyond.

It has led to the creation of thousands of poems and works of art, thousands of hours of service-learning, the planting of thousands of trees, the gathering around thousands of fires with percolating stew pots filled with harvested vegetables, and the sound of thousands of questions reverberating through the cedar woodlands. Through a love of story, curiosity, and community, students find meaning in their learning and constructively apply it to the world around them as they develop a sense of identity and place during a formative time in their lives.

The basic formula of deliberate conversations in the woods with learner inquiry at its core has wider implications. As we wrestle with questions of global climate change and how to reforge a more balanced way of engaging with our world, we need to be thinking deeply about how human-created social systems might better operate with a perennial perspective that sustains and harmonizes with our local ecology. Rather than isolate students in rows in rectangular rooms, bring them to a living space that will provide ever-changing context.

Where better to begin this task with the next generation than beneath the sky around a fire circle? This group of young people, who will increasingly deal with the implications of mass consumption and global climate change, need to see nature as more than an abstraction. We need to create opportunities for youth to know nature as their home, to recognize that a reciprocal and interdependent system is needed, along with creativity and cooperation.

How New Roots Began

Through my work with the team at the Willowell Foundation, we began to expand the scope of our offerings by serving younger students, too. Over the last 14 years, thousands of students experienced nature-based summer camps. This model extended itself to the formation of the Wren’s Nest Preschool program during the school year, where three- to five-year-olds spent their days immersed in the Champlain Valley’s ecology, which included cooking food over fires and nap time in hammocks. With this program successfully concluding its seventh year, we next set our sights on year-round programming for elementary and middle-school students.

Planning was underway for a middle school offering, but this became shelved as the day-to-day exigencies of Covid subsumed our focus in the winter of 2020. And then one day in late July 2020, Willowell’s administrative director, Tasha Ball, called to tell me that parents were reaching out to our organization looking for a safe, creative, pedagogical response to the challenges posed by Covid. The truncated plan that schools were developing—two days a week in masks and a highly regulated environment—seemed antithetical to their notion of what their children needed during this unprecedented challenge.

We agreed to convene a meeting of artists, educators, and community members to create a response that could authentically meet students’ needs during this crisis. Gathering in a gazebo at the town green in Bristol, the diverse group awkwardly looked around at one another, and then slowly ideas began bouncing back and forth. By the meeting’s end, New Roots began to emerge from our intellectual ferment.

Initially New Roots began in a space defined as “the wooded area and a field by the sculptures.” It was there that the core teachers masterfully co-created a learning experience that proved responsive to the students. At first, many of the students were overcome with fear and uncertainty—a byproduct of a global

pandemic. Staff created a space where, day by day, moment by moment, they could existentially respond to the challenges in front of them, all the while integrating their love of art, music, science, math, drama, history, and so much more into the strands and openings that revealed themselves.

As the winter loomed, the need for what we offered remained. The campus slowly became more defined, supported through grants, donations, and volunteer labor from the community. Together, the staff and students refined their experience, asking themselves questions around education, knowledge, and meaning, all within the context of Vermont's ever-changing seasons.

As is the case with any authentic undertaking, bumps and lurches proved inevitable. But as the narratives in the following pages attest, these bumps and lurches created a fertile dialectic that allowed New Roots to become something more than a stopgap during a crisis. Rather, it evolved into a rich and complex learning tapestry that reached 80 families during the pandemic.

As the ecological challenges we face as a species continue, the need for community-based learning integrated into the local ecology seems all the more important. While we hope that New Roots evolves into a full-time program, the value of this project lies in its attempt to fuse education with the present realities. The old truism that the journey is the destination applies here, or as John Dewey presciently observed, "Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself." In New Roots, during a global pandemic, we strove to honor this dictum.

Matthew Schlein is the founder and director of the visionary Willowell Foundation and Walden Project. Since its genesis in 2000, Willowell has pioneered multidisciplinary outdoor-education programs, serving students and teachers from multiple school districts. The Walden Project, a comprehensive, outdoor program, enrolls students from Vergennes Union High School. Matt is president of the Vermont Council of Teachers of English and Language Arts, holds an MA in education, an MSW in counseling from the University of Michigan, and is the recipient of Vermont's Governor's Award for Community Service.

CHAPTER 2

Our Time to Shine

By Tasha Ball, Administrative Director of the Willowell Foundation

The weather was changing; the days were getting shorter. Children were ready to head back to the halls of school. Unfortunately, the pandemic was changing, too, morphing into new variants, taking countless lives, and moving rapidly across our globe.

In rural Vermont, the Agency of Education made the announcement that children would not be going back to full-time, in-person learning, an announcement that sent chaos and frustration rippling through our small communities. Working families were left scrambling to find childcare that was both safe and enriching. After over a year of Zoom meetings, social media connections, video games, and working from home, families had technology fatigue—a heavy and confusing burden that left many feeling empty and hungry.

"How can we let our children spend this much time in front of a screen? How will they get the essential social and emotional support they need from peer-to-peer interactions?" Parents needed support, and children needed to get away from the computer while also staying safe from the virus. The climate was one of panic and frustration as online forums exploded into a chatter of helpless wonderings. The summer had lulled our community into thinking the virus might soon be over, but heading into winter with rising cases, we were buckling down for a longer ride.

It was at this juncture that the New Roots Project was born. Since I am the administrative director of the Willowell Foundation, my inbox was flooded with calls and emails from parents wondering how Willowell could help. "Would we start something? Could we create an outdoor program for children on the days they didn't have in-person school?"

The previous year (before the pandemic was even in our realm of possibility), the Willowell executive director and I had been meeting with a small group of educators in the early phases of starting a farm-based middle school that we

were calling Middle Farm School. We put it on hold when everything else in the world paused. I knew those educators were eager to work with children. Many were public-school teachers who were eager to teach in an environment that encouraged self-expression and a connection to the natural world. So, at the end of July, I reached out to our educators, camp leaders, and board of directors, sending an email that read:

“Do we want to seize this opportunity to launch something new in the way of outdoor Covid response programming? Since the district announced the hybrid model last week, my inbox has been flooded with parents scrambling to figure out what they will do and if Willowell can help. Some people want to send their six-year-olds back to our preschool (we don’t have space; we’re wait-listed). Many want to homeschool. Others simply need to work and have no idea what they will do.

We have hundreds of acres of land to host programming on. We have educators who want to start new programs. Is this our moment? We put Middle Farm School on the back burner because of Covid, but it seems this is our time to shine.”

The response from our board of directors and educators was a resounding YES! And so, the New Roots Project was born. We met weekly and brainstormed this program into being. Still not able to meet indoors and keeping a cautious six feet apart, we gathered around a gazebo in the local park. The process was messy, it was fast, and it generated passion and excitement. This was truly our year to step up at what we’ve been doing for the past two decades—place-based, outdoor education for all.

Equity was one of the most important themes in those early meetings. So often high-quality education is private and selective, but we were building something in response to a community need; therefore, all were welcome! We created a lean budget that would allow us to pay our teachers a living wage but not add much to our overhead costs. Anyone who needed a scholarship was offered one, and no children were turned away.

We started by surveying our local community to gauge the interest and make sure parents would send their children. There was a need: In the first session, we had over 80 children, ages 5–17, enrolled. For rural Vermont, this is a staggering number and more than our little nonprofit had seen set foot on our land at one time.

The Willowell land became a vibrant campus of campfires, song, and skill building. Walking into the woods through an expansive meadow with Hogback Mountain in the backdrop, I could hear shouts and laughter echoing off the trees. Each time I stepped onto the campus to visit the program, my heart swelled with pride, and chills would lift across my skin. It all felt so “right,” and I knew that for many children it was right—the first time they’d truly felt seen or been allowed to express themselves in an organized educational setting. Children were given the

space to run and play, to learn, to carve, to weave, to have meetings about world events, and talk about their sense of self. Five core teachers each brought their own teaching styles and topics. We had metal workers and artists, ecologists and botanists, a math whizz full of elaborate stories, a reading tutor, and a theater buff.

One parent wrote about the New Roots Project, “This program was an absolute gift in a very stressful time. Our children and their friends have been able to have safe, rigorous, expansive outdoor classrooms at a time when every other conversation about school was stressful and depressing.”

Throughout the year, the numbers slowly dropped, but there was enough interest to run four sessions all the way through the school year. The program morphed and shifted as the groups changed with each session. Through the seasons, students and teachers walked down into the woods where they would learn in all the elements of Vermont weather. They were often cold to the bone, muddy, rained on, and alive! They would go home tired and smelling of wood smoke.

Now as children are scattered to summer vacation, we are pausing, gathering our energy, poised to create the school we’ve dreamt of. We hope to launch the New Roots School in the coming years.

Although the pandemic has taken countless lives and wreaked havoc on daily life, it hasn’t all been bad. There have been many silver linings to these past two years. Education is at a turning point, and we humans are recalibrating what is important to us. For some, this year was just the upheaval we needed to set positive steps in motion towards something greater.

Tasha Ball is the administrative director at the Willowell Foundation and a Walden Project alumna. Her work focuses on all things “behind the scenes” at Willowell. Tasha is incredibly proud to work with the Willowell team. They are a group of talented educators, AmeriCorps members, and families who care deeply about the environment and community. The teachers and students are the “heartbeat” that keeps Tasha coming to work every day. Tasha holds a BA in human ecology from College of the Atlantic and a certificate in nonprofit management from Marlboro College. She is an avid gardener, a mother of two young children, and a birth doula. She finds joy in being outdoors through all of Vermont’s weather. Her happy place is at the top of a mountain, beside a river, or swimming in the ocean.

CHAPTER 3

An Invitation Was Sent and Received

By Meghan Rigali, Founding Core Teacher

Matt Schlein, Willowell’s founder, and Tasha Ball, Willowell’s administrative director, sent the invitation to start a Covid response program that would address community needs in the form of outdoor education so that working families could have childcare while the public schools transitioned to full-time virtual learning at the start of the 2020–21 school year. A small team of us met at the Bristol gazebo, wearing masks, seated six feet apart. The warm summer breeze shifted our papers as we spoke. We identified focal areas for logistics, curricula, and communications. The endless stream of unseen work began to materialize from the essence of existing Willowell infrastructure, our desire to be of service to our communities, and our enthusiasm for creating from authentic passion as educators.

In late summer, registration for the New Roots Project took off, along with our garden harvests. As word spread, 80-plus families availed themselves of our support, with or without the ability to pay. We structured the program into three age groups (Chickadees, years 5–7; Wolf Pack, years 8–10; Camp Artemis, years 11–15), with a lead educator for each and two educators who would offer specialized curriculum and support for all.

Ready or Not, Go!

Usually, when a new program is developed, the staff get to know one another, learn about previous experiences, develop a vision and roles, and so on. However, that intentional preparation was a luxury in these circumstances. The creative process of starting the New Roots Project was “all hands on deck, sail the ship while we build it.”

Fortunately, every individual brought a wealth of experience and good character and intentions that we could rely upon to cleverly leverage what the previous 21 years of the Willowell Foundation had established.

From Eric Warren donating his 20-foot yurt to be erected by the educators and their families as a team; to Ethan Mitchell arriving with a free-pile, high-back pink-velvet chair; to veteran special educator Cory Hayes and her partner building furniture for the 5- to 7-year-olds; to the addition of my wilderness-therapy guiding-style tarp and P-cord shelter to the mix for Casey’s 8- to 11-year-old group, we ate, dreamed, and breathed this work. A team of true Renaissance people, we overlapped in our knowledge of construction, the outdoors, arts, herbalism, games, working with youth, and more.

Foam Swords and Other Inventions

This fertile ground gave rise to spontaneous outdoor-classroom innovations, such as Casey’s blackboards that withstand the elements; Ethan’s handmade foam swords and hula hoops; my backcountry handwash and potable-water systems, in addition to health-conscious, laminated posters from Amplifier.org, an art house that inspired a library of beautiful, informative posters to support healthy navigation through a worldwide pandemic. The visual messages that pertained to navigating our current life circumstances (i.e., washing hands, social distancing, and wearing masks) were infused with the consciousness of beauty, solidarity, appreciation, and compassion for all.

Within days of school opening, Eric’s hand-painted signs were installed; Matt mowed the check-in play location; Anthony Kessler, the Willowell building team lead, and Walden Project alumnus Cameron McMahan, collaborated to complete the parking area. We synchronized our schedule with the local school districts.

Rising to the Moment

Adapting art education to the outdoors, without a studio, running water, electricity, or supplies kept in temperature-regulated storage was quite the undertaking. Though I am confident in teaching many things outdoors, including wilderness-survival skills and wildcrafting, the synthesis of the two worlds couldn’t be more of a miracle to pull off. We would collect specimens from the natural world. Leaves and flowers were transmuted, from plants into nature printmaking mandalas. Offering a two-week intensive course on theater and art in collaboration with thespian Gabrielle Schlein provided an adventuresome foray into the archetypes of timeless characters, student-generated skits taking place throughout the landscape in all moods of weather, while donning masks and wielding wands, shields, and more props created in our outdoor maker space using art supplies, cardboard, and forest finds.

Before the yurts were installed on the campus, we transported tools and supplies prior to student arrival and after departure with a builder's trailer. My role was to act as a special-focus teacher, circulating among all three age groups, teaching classes in art, primitive or first skills, ancestral-traditional-bushcraft-survival skills, games, songs, talking in circles/council, all fed by an underground river of ecopsychology and therapeutic-education approaches. As needed, I provided support to groups and teachers throughout the day. In the meantime, our schedule was being redrawn, sometimes daily or weekly, based on experimentation, responsiveness, and reflection, as it affected kids and adults amidst the fluctuations of pandemic life.

In the fall as the cool weather kissed our cheeks, Willowell reached out to Walden Project alumnus Ian Gramling to join our team as educational support which evolved into a full-time AmeriCorps volunteer position. Like many college-age students during the pandemic, Ian was taking a break from his studies at Norwich University. Ian brought a unique appreciation for attending school on the Willowell land, a love of local history, and a kind heart. His background was well suited to our place-based first-responder educational experiment. While mentoring Ian on the design and implementation of his first lessons as an educator at New Roots, the witty, joyful, silly innocence he brought to his writing and relationships emerged alongside passionate scholarship.

The Winter Campus

As essential support in the form of grants was awarded to the New Roots Project, the planning of a winter campus, which would include yurts, woodstoves, handwashing stations, emergency preparedness procedures, and organizing systems for supplies and logistics evolved with the help of our interdisciplinary team.

Meanwhile, Cory Hayes and I dove into research about the Vermont Agency of Education's homeschool program to explore versatile and compatible approaches with our program, which would align with our longtime goal of K-12 outdoor education on the Willowell land. At one of our early weekly staff meetings, the teachers met at the main fire circle at the conclusion of the day, and I presented everyone with a gift of a thermos decorated with the New Roots Project mandala and a packet containing the Vermont Agency of Education homeschool portfolio information. This started our conversation about making our program into an academic complement to homeschool, private, and public-school venues. Over kombuchas and popcorn made on the fire, our teaching team discussed what we were creating.

As the natural world began to transition into the dormant November cycle, cold weather brought us closer to the fires. Teaching under tarp or open-air yurt during rain, the building of the 30-foot yurt became a significant focus for our learning community. During Sessions 2 and 3 at the New Roots Project, the

creation of our winter campus and its systems, practices, and roles furthered the faculty's focus and the students' opportunities to apply their learning in context—an extension of winter wilderness survival, construction, design, collaboration, and imagination.

The 30-foot yurt included a youth-made wood-metal shop, library, games, art tables, handwashing station, and woodstove. Sometimes the anvils on their stumps needed sanding as they would sweat and rust with weather fluctuations, or the MLK celebration posters whose printmaking ink would freeze instead of drying would require defrosting and drying by the woodstove without setting them on fire. Teaching art in the freezing temperatures of winter also meant inviting students to create a Gold Leaf Installation, where they could hang their wet mittens, hats, and coats to dry safely near the woodstove. Our New Roots community returned to the web-of-life scaffolding—our learning with real experiences in relationship to the natural world—while the developmental spectrum of ages 5 to 53 supported the lineage of mentoring and passing knowledge on.

Meghan Rigali is a working artist and interdisciplinary educator with a focus on the fine arts, metals, and the outdoors. Meghan is director of the Willowell Foundation's Gordon Sculpture Park and the New Roots Project. She has exhibited art throughout the United States and Ethiopia and has danced in studios and intensives across the country, including at Dartmouth College where she performed in *Cistern: An Uncommon Ritual* (2007). As an artist-educator, Rigali's work is informed by practices in Tibetan Buddhism, eco-psychology, and contemporary wilderness rites.

Meghan graduated from the San Francisco Art Institute in 2003 with a bachelor's degree in fine art in interdisciplinary studies. In addition, she holds a teaching certificate from Upper Valley Educators Institute. She is a licensed art educator in Vermont, accredited in Wilderness EMT from SOLO, New Hampshire, and is an accredited yoga instructor. Meghan is pursuing an MA at Pacifica Graduate Institute in the field of depth psychology and creativity.

CHAPTER 4

Learning the Art of Teaching at New Roots

By Ian Gramling, AmeriCorps Member

I was the AmeriCorps member for the first year of New Roots. Although I started my term halfway through the school year, I taught there at the beginning of the year and was there almost every day, maintaining a constant presence while the other teachers rotated in and out throughout the course of the week. For much of the term, I was at another Willowell program, Wren’s Nest Forest Preschool. During this year, I became more experienced and skilled as an educator.

My entry into the New Roots Project came as an unexpected but pleasant surprise. In September of 2020, at one of the many historical reenactments I like to partake in, I received a message as I was falling asleep. Feeling curious, I opened it. It was from my teacher from high school, Matt Schein, from my time in the Walden Project, asking me if I was interested in teaching kids in the woods, in particular the kindergarten age group. I figured I was already asleep and just having an awesome dream, as things like this don’t often happen in real life. I said yes and took the opportunity. A couple of emails later, a background check, and a day-long, in-person orientation, I was working as a teaching assistant for the Willowell Foundation.

Going Back to Kindergarten

I was no stranger to elementary education prior to this. I have lived in Ferrisburgh, Vermont, my entire life. I attended Ferrisburgh Central School, and later Vergennes Union High School and Middle School. I had always loved hanging out with younger kids, so in my sophomore year of high school, I volunteered as a teaching assistant for kindergarten at Ferrisburgh Central School, with the

same teacher I had for kindergarten, in the exact same classroom. It was fun, and I also felt as though I was stepping back in time. The whole experience was nostalgic. For my junior year in high school, I joined the Walden Project, as I wanted something different in my education and was really excited about the outdoor aspect. Part of the program involved holding apprenticeships in the local community. For my apprenticeship, I chose to return to the same group of students, this time in first grade, in my old first-grade classroom, as a teaching assistant. These experiences gave me an inside look at classroom teaching and how much work it takes. The following year, I helped lead an outdoor after-school camp at Vergennes Elementary School.

After graduating in 2017, I attended Norwich University as a civilian student chasing a bachelor’s degree in studies in war and peace, being a lifelong military-history enthusiast. In December of 2019, I was following the news covering a new deadly virus, named Coronavirus, tearing through the Wuhan region of China. We braced ourselves, and the virus arrived in America in March. School closed, and I switched to online classes for the rest of my junior year. After finishing, I decided to take a break from college. It turned out to be one of the best decisions I have made.

Designing a First Class

During my first, brief period with New Roots, I was mentored by Meghan Rigali, one of the teachers. She helped me develop a class that I got to teach before I left. In it, I covered the history of the land we had our school on, archaeology and how we could use it to study our local history, showing relics I had found, and finally, a metal-detecting activity. This was my first experience teaching a class. It was both enjoyable and the source of some valuable lessons. I brought in primary sources—photographs, maps, book entries, and census records—to illustrate the story of the Hoag family and previous landowners. I tried to get the point across that there was history beneath our feet, and the landscape around us is alive and has a story. However, I found myself losing the focus of the students, leading me to rethink my approach with this age group.

During this first term, I was working alongside Cory, teaching the youngest age group, the kindergarten and first-grade age group. I have fun, vivid memories of playing many games with them, pretending to be the lamp for a “house” they had created and teaching fire starting. Eventually, the teachers of the other age groups needed an assistant, so I would ping pong between all the groups, depending on what they were doing. As someone who especially enjoys working with younger children, I thought I wouldn’t enjoy being around the older kids as much. That turned out to be quite false. The older age groups proved to be just as fun, with an energetic, sarcastic, creative energy that spread to everyone. The inside jokes, highly organized games, and absorption of more complicated learning material made these kids delightful to work with.

In February of the following year, I returned to the New Roots Project as an AmeriCorps volunteer. Though there were some familiar faces, most of the students were new to me. Eventually we became a very close group that, for the most part, got along well. A learning experience for me as a relatively new teacher involved dealing with interpersonal conflicts. There was one that was especially prominent and long lasting between two students who were close friends outside of New Roots and were navigating having mutual friends and needing a little space from one another. As teachers, we had different approaches to this situation. One approach was to use a system that had the students take turns picking a class on different days, so the other student would go to a different class. My approach was to get them to sit together and to facilitate a conversation between them. I felt that the best thing to do was to create space more than to intervene, and it often worked to diffuse the tension those two felt.

Always Have an Activity

One of my absolute favorite aspects of New Roots was that I had a lot of freedom in what and how I taught. As someone who has a passion for many niche interests and hobbies, like metal detection, reenactments, traditional Irish music, and bushcraft, it was a blessing to be able to incorporate all of that into my teaching. I was able to get kids excited about some of my childhood interests, like ants. The process was relatively simple. A couple of days beforehand (in practice this would often be the night before), I would go online to do some reading and refresh my memory. Then I would write down what I wanted to talk about, key points and facts. During the class, I would lead a “lecture” (as much as I hate that word), answer questions, and then present an activity. There simply needed to be an activity. While I’m perfectly capable of rambling on and on about something, that’s not what the kids are interested in. These students loved to make and do things with their hands. New Roots, being outdoors, was created for that. Being a relatively new teacher with little formal training in childhood development, my approach was to pretend I was teaching my younger self, and it worked out pretty well.

Something I particularly enjoyed was teaching students outdoor skills and the use of tools, such as knives, saws, and hatchets. We started work on building a bridge over the nearby creek, and to see their competence and satisfaction from felling a cedar tree with an axe always made my day. I appreciate New Roots for the opportunity I had to give these kids the experience they gained from these supervised “risky” activities. The trust we have in them will go on to empower them as adults.

There were many different topics I covered in my classes. I remembered my elementary school, organized around “units,” with similar classes covering the same general theme or topic, like magnetism, bacteria, narrative writing, geometry, the Mayan civilization. Each class focused on a different activity

or covered different material, but always fell under the same umbrella. I did something similar at New Roots. Many of my classes fell under the category of Vermont history in one way or another, and that became a general theme. I feel that local indigenous history is the first history kids should be learning, so I placed an emphasis on the Abenaki people and their predecessors, with activities such as making and learning how to use atlatls, or spear throwers. I do Revolutionary War reenacting, so toward the end of the school year, I arrived wearing my full impression (clothing and kit) with a musket, books, and maps and talked to the kids about the history of the Revolutionary War in Vermont—how soldiers lived, how the muskets worked, and how to use a traditional flint and steel. The students absolutely loved it!

Physical Fitness, Espionage, Stealth...

One class series that I had a great deal of fun teaching and planning was the Ninja Training Course. I am fascinated with the figures who played a major role in 16th-century Japan as spies and mercenaries. I wanted to teach the historical reality of operating as a Shinobi, or Ninja, which has been misrepresented and mythologized by modern pop culture. The classes covered physical fitness, espionage, stealth, personal wellness, and martial arts, with the information and activities drawn from primary (old Shinobi training documents) and secondary sources. It was a super fun way of covering different disciplines, including history, physical education, nutrition, and personal wellness, making it palatable for 7–15 year olds. At the end, we had a final Ninja mission culminating in a foam-sword battle.

I am happy to say that I am now in my second term of AmeriCorps service with Willowell at New Roots and will be doing a third term in the fall. Every day, I use the fundamental teaching skills acquired during my first year at New Roots, and I will continue to use them in the future. This barefooted, smoky, sword wielding, shanty singing, idyllic cedar filled sanctuary is not a place of service, but an environment to learn for all of us, and another home for these kids and for me.

Ian Gramling is a member of AmeriCorps, serving at the Willowell Foundation. He is a lifelong resident of Ferrisburgh, Vermont, and a Walden Project alumnus. After graduating from the Walden Project in 2017, he enrolled at Norwich University to pursue a bachelor’s degree in studies in war and peace. Currently, Ian is taking a gap year from Norwich in order to pursue his interests. His experience working with children includes holding many volunteer positions at Ferrisburgh Central School, Shelburne Farms, and working at New Roots during its inaugural session. Ian is a devotee of historical reenactment, primitive camping, hiking, metal detection, Celtic music, and spending time with his family and cats.

CHAPTER 5

Outdoor Education for Extraordinary Times: Reflections of a Teacher

By Casey Burger, Founding Core Teacher

It all started in a gazebo. A bunch of passionate (and quirky) educators, who mostly did not know each other, attempted to pull together programming for kids under the complex pressures of a global pandemic. It was a ripe opportunity to support our community but also to do what we always wanted to do, run full-time outdoor programming. Where better to start this experiment? So, Willowell it was.

Three things have kept us teachers together despite our differences: (1) We were like our students when we were kids, needing hands-on projects, never able to sit still in a classroom for more than a few minutes. (2) We love our students. (3) We love being outdoors.

Throughout the course of this year, there have been all sorts of kids enrolled at New Roots. Some were from the public schools and simply needed somewhere to land while school wasn't in person. We've had homeschooled students who wanted our unique curriculum. We've also had kids who wanted an alternative to the conventions of their public schooling. Many students came and went throughout the year, but a large group has been with us since the beginning.

Adapting on the Fly

Since fall 2020, we as a school have been living outdoors. We have seen the warm

autumn melt into barren leaf fall, then freeze into hard winter, then melt again into life-giving spring, and transition to the heat of summer. Like any creature living outdoors, as a school we've had to adapt and meet each new situation with interest and creativity.

Since our school year has included many different sessions, each session has brought a different configuration of kids. In the very beginning, we had so many children that we had to organize them into age groups, and each group had its own structure and its own main teacher. My group started the day with a morning circle, where we shared animal-encounter stories or the kids' news about what happened over the weekend. Then we had two different blocks of classes, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, taught by me and a floating teacher. Teacher Eric Warren's group of older students often had a more free-range approach to their days, which suited his teaching style, as well as the older age range. Kids took the initiative to build forts and design a tool-workshop space.

Once we shifted gears into the next session, we had fewer kids, but still a variety of ages. So, we threw our former structures to the wind and all the teachers taught together, giving the kids a choice of classes that catered to different interests and learning styles. Every new session was like this: we consistently adapted the content based upon the season, the children, and their overall needs.

So Many Eight- and Nine-Year-Olds

My passion is working with elementary school kids, so when we first started New Roots in September 2020, I volunteered to teach those children. We had so many eight- and nine-year-olds that we made a class just of them. Most were boys. We also had a few groups of best friends, whose high energy determined the whole course of things. Our general routine was to arrive in the morning, drop off our stuff at "camp" Wolf Pack or Ghost Plant (depending on which day you came), and gather firewood. Our first lessons involved learning to determine the best kinds of wood to use (no punky wood because it creates loads of smoke) and to gather a good range of sizes, from mouse tails to wood the size of your thigh.

The range of the curriculum I attempted to teach our students has been massive—from charcoal making to weaving, from blind contour drawing to bookbinding. I told dozens of stories from all over human experience—Norway, the Amur River, and the Abenaki who inhabited the very woods of our classroom. The students absorbed the stories like sponges. Towards the end of the year, students took the initiative to perform one of the stories I told them called "Little Elga" from the Udege people of the Amur River Valley. The students wrote a script, directed a performance, and designed costumes.

Some of the stories I told attracted students like moths to a flame, and others bounced off their shoulders like rain on a raincoat. "Little Elga" really took root in the kids' souls. "Why?" you might ask. I am not exactly sure. From my perspective, it is a special story because of the culture and biodiversity it represents, such as

the world's largest salmon that can measure as big as a full-grown person and a particularly fierce Amur tiger that prowls the birch tree forests. But it's also a story about a little girl who is abused by her stepmother and perseveres with help from the natural world, and with courage and great skill. There are talking tigers, wooden toys that grow into animals, and people who turn into owls. What's not to like?

Being part of this incredible experiment called New Roots has been such an adventure and a great privilege. It's an experience I will never forget; from here on, it will always inform my choices as an educator in love with hands-on, outdoor, natural education.

Thank you, Willowell, for taking such a huge gamble on this program.

Gardener, musician, craftsperson, and carpenter, **Casey Burger** has worn many hats throughout her career as a human being and is dedicated to sharing her passions and knowledge with children. She has been running nature-based craft and cooking camps with the Willowell Foundation for the last five years.

Casey holds a BA in integral sustainable development from Warren Wilson College. She is certified in biodynamic agriculture and is trained in inclusive social development through the Camphill Village Academy in Copake, New York.

Originally from the northern Catskills of New York, she ventured into the New York State public school system to work with children with special needs. She went on to co-create a full-time nature-based elementary curriculum at Hawthorne Valley Waldorf School in Columbia County, New York, and worked as a teacher there before moving to Vermont in 2015.

CHAPTER 6

The Power of Spontaneity

By Ethan Mitchell, Founding Core Teacher

Sometime late in the plague summer of 2020, Tasha Ball ran into me in the preschool parking lot. She mentioned that Walden, where I've guest-taught for 15 years or so, was opening an outdoor elementary school as a Covid response. Did I want to get involved? This seemed precipitous to me since the school year was only a few weeks off and fraught with unknowns.

A few days later, I was sitting in the Bristol park gazebo with my soon-to-be-colleagues, some pizza, and a lot of hand sanitizer. Most of us had never met before, let alone worked together. We had no campus, apart for some roughly indicated sections of forest, no materials, no curriculum, and maybe three weeks to prepare. It felt very spontaneous, and to the extent that we shared a vision of what became New Roots, the vision was, perforce, largely one of spontaneity. Ten months later, it feels a little premature to assess what we have or haven't accomplished in the Monkton woods. But for me, it has been 10 months of thinking about the role of unplanned, accidental moments in education. That's what I'd like to discuss here.

Spontaneity is a somewhat worrisome educational virtue. Most of the teachers I've worked with love the idea of it as a flavor element in their classroom, and some schools place it in their little shrine of buzzwords. In an outdoor school, especially, moments of spontaneous learning often feel like magical gifts: the morels fruiting under the woodpile, the ice storm glazing the trees, the unavoidable lessons presented by the need for shelter and fire. These are clearly memorable learning experiences: whenever I ask students about the moments that stood out for them, they tend to highlight the exceptional and impromptu, rarely the carefully prepared class.

And yet magical teaching moments are hardly reliable. Sometimes there are no morels under the woodpile. Sometimes it's 20 degrees and windy, and you just need to get the fire lit without having a little mini-lesson on surface-to-volume ratios. Sometimes—this is a trickier one—you spent five hours prepping for a class on fractals and lugged a bunch of materials down the hill, and you don't want all your efforts to go to waste just because someone spotted a pileated woodpecker. One of our AmeriCorps volunteers, for his very-first-ever lesson plan, suggested having the students hunt for archaeological artifacts, and several of us hog piled on him: you can't just assume you'll have an awesome chance encounter as the basis of your lesson plan. He took that in stride and changed his plans.

And perhaps, also, spontaneity has a dark side: it blends into the monkey-mind realm of constant distraction and seems to evade the ideas of discipline, training, and steady progress that are essential to many kinds of skill building. I've seen groups where the emphasis on "self-organization" or emergent activities seemed like an excuse for disorganization and under-preparedness. In different ways, all the teachers at New Roots, myself included, leaned in the direction of over preparation. But we were contending with a situation where our plans often had to change.

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From its sudden origins, the New Roots Project became a kind of crash course on spontaneity. We threw around the term "emergent curriculum" a lot. For many reasons—Covid exigencies, the particular students we attracted, the difficulties of establishing a campus in the woods from scratch—we spent a lot of time making plans, immediately abandoning those plans, and embracing the teachable moments. Whatever they were.

Some of these stand out in retrospect. Over the first week or so of classes, our younger students catapulted themselves from deep social isolation into a kind of rambunctious play that threw epidemiological caution to the winds. To keep some distance between them, we introduced foam swords ("boffers") and a large number of hula hoops. In the fall of 2020, parents picking up their kids were often witness to a sort of fencing-and-hula-hooping extravaganza, which usually kept the students two yards apart, as intended.

These simple elements soon became ubiquitous. The foam swords broke and got mended and changed. They were repurposed into other games. By the winter, a lengthy typed document had appeared laying down the rules for fencing, New-Roots-style. Eric offered a class on carving swords out of wood, and some students put a lot of time and effort into their swords. The hula hoops also were repurposed into other games and became the subject of various discussions of physics. I used the hula hoops to teach Venn diagrams. Students hung them on ropes as part of an obstacle course, which was itself an impromptu project that

emerged from our need to clean up slash after some trees were felled.

Along with the obstacle courses, the students wanted to build tree houses and forts in the woods. Some of those structures became fairly elaborate team-carpentry projects, with a sideline in knotwork; the obstacle courses evolved into speed runs with timers, slack-line practice, and several discussions of momentum and center-of-gravity that resurged in a later project on kinetic sculpture. These projects—all student-initiated and impromptu affairs—made it into several people's end-of-year recollections about the most memorable things they'd done at New Roots.

In the fall, Casey told the story of "Little Elga," from the Amur River people of eastern Siberia and Manchuria. In the ensuing discussion, someone proposed turning it into a play. The students leapt on that idea, creating a script, costumes, a set. June, one of the older students, directed it. I was initially dubious, but it all came together, and eventually they performed it for the older school (the Walden Project) in the spring.

I am highlighting these examples because they go beyond the "look, look, it's a fox!" version of spontaneity, magical as that can be. From sudden enthusiasms and opportunities, we saw students pursuing complex projects over the course of weeks or months, working through challenges and setbacks, and building a range of skill sets. In the fall, a couple of students hit on the quixotic goal of making waffles on an open fire, and they pursued that project—with sideline discussions of heat conduction, oil smoke points, and so forth—for months, with impressive tenacity. And yes, they made some decent waffles eventually. That all seems valuable and worth consideration.

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Stories like these often get described as a kind of educational serendipity, but I think that undersells them a bit. They can also get confused with the nearby theme of learning through play, though not all play is spontaneous, and a great deal of spontaneity is not play, though it may feel playful. Spontaneous learning feels valuable to me in part because it's clearly very memorable: those lessons "stick" in students' minds when others might be forgotten. But it also feels valuable because it is a scarce and fragile thing, like finding a rare flower in the woods. There is an aspect of serendipity in hunting for wildflowers, of course, but there's also a lot to be said for understanding the ecosystem, knowing when and where to look and how to recognize them when you find them, and importantly, not stepping on them when you do.

Like the associated Walden Project, New Roots has the distinct advantage of being outside. A lot happens outside: the weather changes, the seasons change, wild animals come and go—sometimes with your lunch. These things are unplanned, but they are in a sense predictable. The brook will freeze in the

winter; the trout lilies will bloom in the spring; there will be thunderstorms as summer approaches. There are questions and discussions and linked concepts that flow easily from each of those moments.

We are in the forested landscape of Vermont, but I've also worked with youth groups in the inner city, and the same thing was true there: a lot happens on the street in East Baltimore. In both cases, there are rich opportunities for spontaneous learning. This is also true on field trips, travel, or other contexts with a lot of unpredictability, and all of those tend to be memorable experiences for the students. By contrast, inside a traditional classroom, almost nothing happens unless it is specifically brought in by the teacher or a student. There are no squirrels, no street dramas, no new vistas. There's not even weather. Magic moments might be happening outside, but they can't get in.

Within a "walled school," I think the spaces that have the most opportunity for spontaneity are probably the ones that involve work, and especially work that is not construed as part of a lesson plan. So, the woodshop, yes, but even more so, the kitchen or the garage. I question the wisdom of walling off classrooms in the first place, but that's unlikely to change. On the other hand, involving students in the actual work of the school seems eminently reasonable and straightforward, and yet it is uncommon. Perhaps this is because it's often presented as a child-labor program to cut costs and/or "build character."

At New Roots, we constructed two yurts and a couple of temporary shelters, among other site modifications. The students were involved in some of those projects, and they provided the nucleus for a lot of spontaneous lessons—tool use, geometry, estimating volumes, calculating pi, structural integrity, and so on. But we didn't demand some set amount of labor from them, and I doubt it would have cut our costs a penny if we had.



Near the end of the school year, there was a chipmunk stealing food, and some of the younger students became excited by the idea of catching it. They began building a variety of chipmunk traps, working through the engineering questions as best they could. Meanwhile a klatch of older students offered a \$1 bet that the chipmunk would not get caught (which they won) and had a heartwarming-to-a-math-teacher's-ears discussion about estimating the odds of a chipmunk getting caught. In the course of this discussion, one of them noted that time is a major factor: a bad trap left out all day might work, while a good trap that's only there during lunch might fail.

And that, I think, neatly depicts the second major fact of spontaneous learning. You can be in a rich context—chipmunks running around everywhere—but if you don't give yourself time, you won't catch anything. In a school setting, to capitalize on potential moments of spontaneous learning, you need to have

a flexible schedule. If the day is divided into eight blocks separated by alarm bells and reshufflings of the student body, there is virtually no way to utilize emergent opportunities. If you're teaching a biology class and you notice that the wildflowers are blooming out behind the soccer field...too bad. You have a bunch of 50-minute slots to work in, and after taking attendance and collecting homework and getting everyone over there and back, you don't have time to talk about pollination and floral structures. You don't have any time at all.

New Roots experimented with many kinds of schedules, all of them fairly loose (no bells!) and buffered by malleable chunks of "free time," which classes could spill into. There are other ways to achieve that flexibility, but all of them require a certain attitude towards the schedule. And that doesn't come easily, even for the students.

A recurrent set of discussions at New Roots, ranging from silly to plaintive, had to do with the categorization of blocks of time. The morning meeting—which had dozens of names, including "morning toast," "morning heigh-ho," and "artemorning"—was easily the aspect of the day that students most vocally loathed, but it often involved games and conversations which were almost indistinguishable from those during "free time." I had a shocking number of conversations with students who wanted to know the precise moment when the morning free time "became" snack, even though they were all snacking during "free time" and playing during "snack." And I had a similar number of conversations with students who were, for instance, reading a book up in a tree and wanted to know if it was "free time" yet. I can't really fathom any of this, except to say that people like to divide time into neatly labeled blocks and then ignore those labels, and I think it's important that this process leaves room to catch the squirrels of spontaneity.



In most classrooms, teachers spend a lot of time telling students to stop doing things. This is unpleasant but unavoidable since it often involves health and safety issues. We're telling Johnny to stop throwing pencils and (lately) telling Susan to stop taking her mask off. But this police routine easily becomes a habit, and the list of behaviors teachers reflexively forbid tends to expand, often without much internal logic. The very reasonable "don't throw the pencils" morphs into the more subjective "don't waste the crayons" and from there, slides towards "don't use the art supplies at all."

It's easy to fall into this trap even if one is not temperamentally inclined to. I once admonished a student not to draw on her hand, for instance, and she pushed back and asked why not. I had to admit I wasn't sure. It just seemed like the sort of thing that teachers tell students not to do. (At least I did not make up a canard about "ink poisoning," which I remember my own teachers using.)

The endpoint of this, in most walled classrooms, is that there is a particular lesson plan, and the teacher immediately and righteously quashes any deviation from it. Anything that isn't part of the curriculum—humming, doodling, looking at an outside book—is suspect behavior. So, the teacher is maintaining a “Wall of No” against any kind of student-initiated spontaneity.

Outdoor schools, whatever their pedagogical bent, are forced to rethink this from the ground up. Being in the woods involves some attractive hazards that are completely forbidden in most classrooms on the basis of safety. Knives and fire are the two most obvious ones, and we spent so much time discussing them that we considered renaming New Roots the “Knives and Fire School.” In fact, on the far side of a few basic safety lessons, knives and fire in the context of New Roots aren't actually all that dangerous. I am far more worried about hypothermia and uneven terrain. But the “Ice and Tripping Hazards School” doesn't have quite the same ring as “Knives and Fire,” does it?

New Roots, like every outdoor program I know, placed a heavy emphasis on safety. All the staff took a wilderness-first-aid course, and we taught wilderness medicine as part of a broader health and safety focus. Because we weren't saying “no knives” or “no fire,” it opened a big gate in the Wall of No. If it's been established that it's OK for (properly vetted) students to use a razor-sharp knife or drop an entire sapling in a bonfire, it gets a lot harder to reflexively say “don't waste the crayons.”

But old habits die hard. When Ella started smashing rocks together, I told her not to, and she wanted to know why not. After all, the boys were happily incinerating everything in their lunch box, and if that was OK, why not smashing rocks? Another stumper. Ink poisoning, maybe? I let it go, and Ella proceeded to create a rather large color palette of pigments ground from the local rocks and then opened a paint store on top of a stump, the first of several miniature business ventures that appeared at New Roots. So, we talked a bit about iron ore—New Roots is just up the road from an old mine—and how ochre burials are some of the first of evidence we have of human belief in the afterlife. That is a lot to learn from an activity that my immediate impulse was to squash.

And that could be said of almost everything I've mentioned here, and much else. The “sword” fights with sticks, certainly. Violet's exploration of molten beeswax. The chipmunk death-traps, and the similarly designed but larger obstacle courses. There were several instances of students becoming fascinated with a book someone had brought in and spending hours poring over it. This ranged from a spin-off of the TV show *Gravity Falls* to a colonial-era etiquette book to the ancient Mayan Dresden Codex. The latter two might seem more “academic,” but it was Dragon's love of *Gravity Falls* that sent many of the students on a week-long voyage into cryptography and the mathematics of substitution ciphers.

Yet in all these cases, I reflexively felt that I should be throwing up the Wall of No. Don't let them talk about code-breaking or 18th-century manners all day

long, this is a school! Hell, my initial reaction to the proposed “Little Elga” play was to squash it, and that play wound up being a major focus of the “emergent curriculum.” Clearly, the impulse to squash, to throw up the immediate Wall of No, is not conducive to spontaneous learning. To be sure, there are some lines of exploration that aren't that productive—we drew the line at “waving burning sticks around” and “eating plants you have not identified” and so forth. But an ongoing lesson for me at New Roots was that there were many student-initiated activities that I might easily have suppressed, which went on to become highly educational, and all the more so because the motivation was coming from the students, not the teachers. While it might be reasonable to tell students not to waste time trying to make waffles on an open fire, it is basically the same logic as telling students not to waste crayons on artwork. But if you're willing to give some ground for that experiment, sometimes it's very fruitful ground.

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Those are the lessons I took home from this year in the woods. I believe spontaneity is a powerful force in pedagogy because it hacks directly into the emotional mechanics of learning, which we too often ignore. Novelty is interesting. Projects emerging from one's own passions (or whims!) are interesting. We remember, which is to say we learn, things that are interesting.

At the same time, I don't think that an appreciation for spontaneous learning can be reliant on serendipity alone: wouldn't it be a cool lesson plan if we found some morels and archaeological artifacts today? There are at least three ways to put our fingers heavily on the scale. We need to operate in a context—whether it is the northern forest or a school kitchen or a city curb—where it's possible for things to happen that we haven't planned in advance. We need to have a schedule that allows us to respond to those events when they happen. And we need to have an attitude that welcomes those opportunities—at least on sufferance—rather than rejecting them out of hand.

Ethan Mitchell has been teaching at the Walden Project and in various other places for 15 years. He focuses on history and mathematics, but he likes teaching a wide variety of subjects through the lens of history and math. He is also a dad, an essayist, a researcher, and a dreamer. He spends a lot of time cooking, canning, coding, and doing construction.



TOP: Eric Warren teaches Camp Artemis students about kinetic sculpture, integrating balance points and wood forms found on the land. Student-created sculpture installations welcomed visitors to campus for the annual Art Under the Stars event, which culminated in art installations throughout the forest, a potluck meal, and poetry reading around the Walden Project fire circle. **BOTTOM LEFT:** Henry saws logs to feed the morning fire. **BOTTOM MIDDLE:** Grant uses an anvil in the shop of the big yurt to cold forge his Gold Leaf and Hook installation. **BOTTOM RIGHT:** A student's mittens and hat will be hung to dry near the woodstove in the big yurt on this hand-forged Gold Leaf and Hook. *(Photos by Meghan Rigali)*



TOP: Students from Gabrielle Schlein and Meghan Rigali's theater arts class prepare to bring hot cocoa on their walks to locations on the land where they will rotate through student-generated skits using original props. **TOP RIGHT:** Eric Warren teaches students about building frames using lumber, hand drills, and screws on the big yurt platform during its construction. **BOTTOM:** Camp Artemis students create an alternative print-making process in the small yurt. Their original compositions use plants selected from the land. *(Photos by Meghan Rigali)*



TOP: Ada and Isaac pose in front of the New Roots Mandala screen prints made by each student with Meghan Rigali. (Photo by Meghan Rigali) BOTTOM LEFT: Elena is immersed in the process of making her mandala screen print. (Photo by Meghan Rigali) BOTTOM RIGHT: Meghan Rigali teaches fire making to the Chickadees. (Photo by Cory Hayes)



LEFT: Violet enjoys some free exploration time in the early days of New Roots. RIGHT TOP: Jack is excited and in wonderment of an abandoned bird's nest he found. RIGHT BOTTOM: Steel fires up homemade tortillas during Casey Burger's Bread Over Open Fire course. The students made and bound their own cookbooks. (Photos by Meghan Rigali)

CHAPTER 7

How We Found Hope During the Pandemic

A parent's perspective, by Caetlin Harwood

When Covid hit, back in March 2020, I had a kindergartner, second grader, and fourth grader, all in different schools. They each require their own style of education, two of them being neurodiverse. With all three close in age, the mixed-age classrooms commonly found in small rural Vermont schools only amplify their need for autonomy in an educational setting.

The driving, schlepping, countless styles of parent-teacher conferences, opposing vacation schedules, and wide-ranging play dates are all par for the course and a lifestyle that I have taken on willingly. By 2020, with my third and final child entering kindergarten, I had already spent years deliberating the various needs of my children and had oscillated between public and private schools for each of them. In total, they had changed schools five times.

My relationship with education is similar to theirs. I spent my elementary years at my local public school, but upon entering middle school, it became clear that I needed something different. I was diagnosed with ADHD, and my pediatrician felt it important that I be placed in an academic setting that was more tailored towards the individual student, as opposed to a standardized process where one size is meant to fit all. “Caetlin will never have a desk job,” she told my parents. My diagnosis was my first exposure to the concept that there are various learning styles and would later serve me well as I raised my own neurodiverse children.

Learning How to Learn

I was fortunate to be able to attend a small private liberal arts high school called Gailer that served students grades 7–12. There were only 60 students in the school. The headmaster handpicked the teachers for their creative and ingenious ways of reaching students. It was in this school that I learned what type of learner I am. I

was encouraged to think “outside the box” and to challenge social and academic norms in a safe environment, where questioning was encouraged rather than shuttered. I developed a healthy sense of self and a true passion for the topics that interested me.

In my junior year, at age 16, I chose to transfer to my local public high school for a variety of reasons. If there is ever a time that transferring schools is detrimental, I think it's safe to say the junior year is it. The other students have created well-established friend groups. The clicks are well formed; everyone knows their place, their pecking order, and how to navigate the system of high school etiquette. I was the new girl, socially awkward and uncomfortable in this new setting. I found myself overwhelmed by the size of the student population, so I resorted to hiding in the bathrooms between classes in order to avoid the chaos of the hallway transfers. I couldn't get comfortable with the single-file, forward-facing, solitary-desk scenario, while an unenthused teacher droned on from a lesson plan that they wrote two decades prior. Questions and healthy debate were not only discouraged, they also weren't even part of the educational vocabulary. I realized quickly that my job was to sit still, be quiet, and take notes. This was about as comfortable as asking me to squeeze my size-nine feet into a petite six.

By the end of that year, I got a glimmer of hope when I was introduced to the Walden Project. Walden, only in its infancy at that time, was an entirely outdoor-based program run by Matt Schlein and Jonathon Park, and they had managed to get this program embedded into the district's offerings as an alternative for students who needed something “a little different.” At that time, the Walden students were perceived as hippies, a segregated group of weirdos who carried with them a healthy waft of woodsmoke cologne. Although they were less than accepted by the rest of the school population, I took note that they didn't seem to care. They always seemed to enjoy each other's company. The teachers were called by their first names and had a candor with the students that reminded me of my previous years at Gailer. Each morning, Walden students were able to escape the stifling conformity of the high school building and disappear into the woods, which seemed all the more appealing to me.

The Walden Project has always been a refuge for teens who are perhaps arguably more evolved than many of their peers. The loving and intuitive guidance that the teachers bring to the group is a mentorship like no other. The land, a sprawling 230 acres of protected wilderness and woodland in the heart of Vermont, brings a sweet relief to the traditional educational setting. The conversations around the campfire that encourage personal growth produced some of my most valuable lessons. These, mixed with the bond that came from learning to endure the outside elements and hardships, created a uniquely blended opportunity for me that most young adults are not fortunate enough to have in their formative years.

My experience in Walden and on the Willowell property was so profound that I often found myself wishing that such an experience could someday be an option

for my own children. One of my Walden peers became the administrative director of the Willowell Foundation, and over the years, she and I had discussions about this possibility, but it seemed to remain a distant goal.

The Day Normalcy Vanished

When the pandemic hit and schools shut down with zero notice, every parent in America was left scrambling. In today's world, most two-parent households require dual incomes, and working parents came to a screeching halt as childcare suddenly vanished. Not only were schools closed, but also friends and family members and our communities that usually rally to help raise children were no longer an option out of fear of getting one another sick. Within weeks, what we thought was going to be possibly a long vacation turned into a marathon of groundhog days littered with Zoom meetings, curbside material pick-ups, teachers wiping away tears from behind their masks, and children frozen with fear and uncertainty as the adults around them began to crumble. All sense of normalcy was gone almost in an instant.

Suddenly, our home, which had always encouraged autonomy, independence, and a healthy amount of time away from one another to experience daily life as individuals, was consumed with togetherness. Our 1,100-square-foot home, which had always felt small, became microscopic as it tried to hold the large and ambitious personalities that our family of five possesses.

My youngest, Isaac, would run and hide in his room when his virtual kindergarten classes started each day. I would attempt to follow him around with the iPad, allowing his teacher to coax him out of hiding with the familiarity of her voice, bribing him to simply sit in front of the screen in exchange for a box of cookies later. All his little friends would stare back blankly from their "Hollywood squares," and the poor teacher would try her best to be engaging, but it was a losing battle. Within a matter of weeks, my begging and coercing was doing nothing other than fueling an increasing anxiety, and I gave up on the entire process. I agreed to message the teacher daily, letting her know what we did that day to account for attendance and keep the truancy police at bay, but otherwise we considered kindergarten officially over.

My middle son, Ezra, who has been diagnosed as a diverse learner, had been attending a private school in the next town over. He was even more averse to distance learning. We were sent schedules broken down into 15-minute increments, designed for a classroom setting and completely impossible to implement at home. Everyone was concerned about academic regression; meanwhile all I could focus on was their state of mind. Ezra, then in second grade, began to act depressed. He would lie in his bed for hours, curtains drawn, refusing to get out of bed, let alone willingly engage with anyone on the computer.

The Nightmare of School at Home

Well-meaning teachers attempted to provide endless opportunities for creative projects and engagements, which only produced a hellish nightmare for me, as I would run from one room to the next, trying to help each kid with their various needs. Distant requests for super glue would be yelled from one corner of the house, while I would be reading instructions to a child that couldn't read yet, and then simultaneously another would be melting down about a scavenger hunt that just wasn't going right. To make my life easier, I asked the teachers for something simpler and more manageable. "Let's stick to the basics," I suggested. This merely produced endless supplies of worksheets and busy work. The three-ring binders loaded with letter tracings, word searches, and multiplication problems took up every spare corner in the house. By the end of April, I thought to myself, I can do this a whole lot better.

I began designing my own curriculum, with short-term goals and efficiency in mind. Over the years of considering my children's education, homeschooling was never an option on the table. Not that I didn't feel capable, but the freedom that we all received from having our own sovereignty each day was not something I was prepared to give up, and Covid only confirmed that instinct.

We got through it, albeit with plenty of ups and downs. We had various mental health providers on speed dial, took plenty of afternoons in front of the television, and deepened our debating skills like never before. I navigated those four months with a constant eye on emotional health and a steady pulse on academic achievement, drawing on my own experiences that learning can only take place when there is engagement. Some days we had it, and some days we didn't. Summer brought a sweet relief.

Nothing But Difficult Choices

By mid-July, the national Covid discussion regarding education was beginning to ask some difficult questions. How are we going to educate our children? Covid was clearly not going to be gone in time for the next school year. As the Vermont Department of Education began releasing information about what school would look like for the upcoming year, we were faced with another difficult decision: either carry on for another year at home the way we had been or send our children to school, with an even more restricted setting.

We started receiving frequent emails from the superintendents and principals outlining pages worth of precautions that they would be taking to keep everyone safe. Round tables would disappear and be replaced with forward-facing single desks. Each child would be surrounded by plexiglass, they would wear masks at all times, and there would be no socializing outside of their own classroom. Hallway times would be staggered, playgrounds were off limits, the cafeteria was shut down, and parents must stay in their cars. The terminology was fear laden, ominous, and discouraging. It felt like staring down the barrel of a rifle and being asked if you

wanted to take one bullet or two. Staying home together for another year was out of the question, but the proposed restrictions would be equally as intolerable for my kids.

I asked the kids to go to school and give this new approach a shot for one month. With only a four-week plan in place at that point, I began reaching out and researching options.

Other folks were doing the same, and social media soon began blowing up with healthy discussions regarding alternatives. Parents were forming pods and discussing homeschooling groups to lighten each other's loads, martial arts centers were offering large open spaces with teen tutors available, and "outdoor classroom" became the new buzzword. Suddenly, it seemed as though everyone was energized and motivated enough to start thinking about educational alternatives, especially if it could be implemented in an outdoor setting.

New Roots Set Us Free

It was during this time that Willowell advertised through social media that they were offering an outdoor program, with various scholarships available. They encouraged prospective families not to let financial reasons prohibit them from applying. New Roots would be stationed on the same 230-acre property that the Walden Project occupies, although the New Roots and the Walden student groups would have separate spaces. I immediately called my friend who was the administrative director for Willowell and asked her to sign my kids up!

I felt a sense of relief almost instantly. Finally, an option that felt viable. My kids were going to get the same experience that I did in this setting. Because the same groups of people were putting New Roots together as Walden, the ethos and priorities were similar. New Roots was admittedly a response to Covid, but it also was an excellent opportunity to launch something long talked about. It pulled in like-minded educators who were described as innovative, curious, creative, and insantly excited about the opportunity to engage with children out in nature. They would provide daily classes that offered a variety of choice for the students and were committed to integrating core concepts through a variety of inventive methods. Eric's woodworking shop provided countless opportunities to learn about math and engineering. Casey's baking over open fires not only utilized chemistry concepts, but also provided history lessons about the places where the recipes had originated. Basket weaving, sculpture making, storytelling, shelter building, and fire starting only name a handful of the incredible opportunities that New Roots was offering students.

After that month of strict mask wearing, plexiglass barriers, and constant reminders to keep their distance, my kids were excited to be able to flee the restrictive nature of what school had become and to engage in their world and surroundings again. With New Roots being outside, it was easier for all of us to relax a little bit around Covid restrictions, but that doesn't mean that none of the

precautions were there. The kids still got temperature checks daily, were asked the same questions, and wore masks when social distancing wasn't possible, but it was the energetic nature attached to this process that felt so different.

Daily Intake the New Roots Way

When the intake questions came around, instead of going through the exact CDC list every morning, which kids learned quickly to say "no" to repeatedly without even waiting for the question, the teachers got creative. "Could you taste and smell your breakfast this morning?" they began asking. This approach provided an opening for communication, while still getting the information that was needed. Unfortunately, it was learned quickly through this approach that my children often skipped breakfast and rarely brushed their teeth in the morning, but many a good laugh was had before they even got out of the car.

The stress on me as a parent—to keep the three of them engaged and connected while simultaneously experiencing Covid isolation, new schools, and challenging family dynamics—began to subside. In order to enroll the children in New Roots primarily full time, I had to unenroll them from the public school district and fill out applications for homeschooling. It required me to research the necessary requirements for completing each of their grade levels and to create a plan that would ensure those goals were met.

My daughter, Violet and the eldest of the three, has some academic challenges that in years past qualified her for an Individualized Educational Plan and access to special educators. I was nervous about suddenly becoming the one responsible for ensuring that her needs in that department were being met. Isaac hadn't even finished kindergarten and would be at a deficit by 2022 as an entering second grader if he couldn't read. These were just a few of my concerns.

The New Roots team was amazing at quelling my fears and listening to the various needs of the kids, and to mine. During drop-off one morning in the fall, I was in a particularly overwhelmed state and began to cry, as I divulged all my stressors to the unsuspecting teachers. They listened intently as I confessed that I didn't think I could juggle all the kids' needs and continue to keep my job and sanity. The previous morning, Ezra (who was still attending his elementary school) had been turned away from school because of a runny nose, and we scrambled to put together a week's worth of childcare (knowing he didn't have Covid but having no other option if we were going to keep our employment). Not only were the teachers at New Roots empathetic to my situation, but they also agreed to have Ezra any time that he was unable to attend his regular school, permitting he passed the daily screening. "This is what we're here for," Eric said to me that morning. If we were still allowed to hug each other, I would have embraced him right then.

So Many Positives

I've watched my children embrace so many positive things over this last year, out

in the woods with the New Roots group. They have endured every type of weather, from below-zero temperatures to mid-80s and muggy. They come home every day covered in mud, often barefoot, and grinning from ear to ear. They have become experts in layering, and even get points from the teachers during winter months for every layer they have on. They have developed an appreciation for nature and all that comes with it, because they have found the confidence not just to withstand the elements, but also to form a relationship with them. They climb into the car each afternoon excited to show me each rock, stick, and special leaf that they found that day. My dashboard will be forever adorned with quite the woodland assortment.

Their stories of mud-hill sliding, marriage ceremonies between trees, and intense campfire discussions brought me back to the wonderful experiences I also had on that property. My kids were learning to ask the tough questions, to negotiate with other people who felt differently about things, and to discover what aspects of learning they truly enjoyed. The mud-trodden boots, wet car seats, and dirt-filled lunch boxes were totally worth the effort and only enhanced the experience. When parents pick their kids up from a traditional day at school, most ask, “What did you do today?” Sometimes we get some decent details, but for the most part, responses come in the form of shoulder shrugs and non-committal explanations. With New Roots, however, whether you want to know about your kids’ day or not, you’re going to hear about it.

I believe the program’s focus on connection encourages that dynamic, and the teachers are just as communicative and open with me as the kids are. Whenever we have had social mishaps or personality clashes between students, the teachers have always been quick to inform parents, but they also allow the kids an opportunity to problem-solve amongst themselves. As a kid and teen, I had experienced such a range of interactions in various school settings that the “coming home feeling” I experienced in bringing my kids to New Roots was not lost on me. The teachers were genuinely interested in getting to know each student as an individual.

Our parent-teacher conferences this past year were the best conferences I’ve ever experienced! Instead of being scheduled into 15-minute chunks, with the parent being provided some random worksheets with scores on the top and the latest finger painting done in class, New Roots approached it from an entirely different perspective. Not only did they provide the time for parents to be part of a satisfying discussion, but they also were able to reflect back the same social and emotional changes that I had been seeing in my kids at home. They saw Isaac’s over-powering need to always be at his sister’s aid. They experienced the struggle between Violet and her best friend as they navigated pre-teen angst and opposing needs for control. They homed in on Isaac’s desperate desire for independence and gave him the freedom to do his projects his way, without forcing a specific formula. And they expressed a genuine investment and excitement around fostering their growth as independent people. Never have I walked away from a parent-teacher conference feeling more elated and encouraged.

Defining Success: The Light in Their Eyes

How does one define success? I believe that Covid has provided an opportunity for us all to reflect on what our priorities are and how we define success as those priorities change. For me, as a parent of young children, I have felt as though this definition has transformed regularly. There were months that academic achievement felt like success; if each kid could “pass” their current grade level, they would be OK, and I would be a successful parent. There were weeks that maintaining basic social etiquette felt successful; my kids mustn’t forget their table manners as the evenings in front of the television slipped by. There were many times that just getting through the day still enjoying each other’s company felt like a success; various closets and corner cupboards were converted into cozy corners to provide some much-needed space from one another.

Overall, throughout the entire experience, seeing that my children have connection, support, and encouraged curiosity that ignites their spirit has felt like success for me as a parent. The darkest of our days were the ones when I feared the light in their eyes would remain muted. When we felt we had nothing to look forward to, nobody to spend time with, and had exhausted our creative outlets, that was when I really felt motivated to uncover the hidden opportunities of the pandemic.

Resiliency, resourcefulness, and open-mindedness are qualities that I consider imperative to success in life. When viewed through that lens, Covid has been a persistent teacher, giving us the perfect opportunity to exercise these qualities. Exposure to various learning styles, recognizing the educational value in nature, and building relationships have been hallmarks of our successes during the pandemic.

This past year has somehow managed to fly by, despite the monotony of it all. I have no idea what next year has in store for my kids regarding which school they will be attending, but I do know that if New Roots is an option, even as a supplemental program, we will be there!

I am thankful more than ever for the benefits that have come through New Roots and my willingness to challenge the societal norms when it comes to how we move our youth through the world. A worldwide pandemic and our response to it have provided me with a resounding confirmation of this belief. My kids are coming out of this experience with confidence, self-knowledge, inquisitive minds, and a feeling of community. What more could any parent ask for?

Caetlin Harwood, a multigenerational Vermont farmer, enjoys spending any free time in the woods when not running her business. Her passions for raising free-range children and rescuing animals keep her actively volunteering in her community. She is also a poet, activist, and serial entrepreneur, all of which she attributes to the Walden Project’s influence.

CHAPTER 8

The Blessing That Is New Roots

A parent's perspective, by Elizabeth Davidson

As a parent, I've always had a homeschool/outdoor school attitude, but with a single mom/business owner budget and schedule. I have a bachelor's degree in elementary education and have worked in the public school system as an assistant teacher and as a special educator. I love kids. But I struggle with watching them struggle. Some kids may thrive being educated in 40-minute blocks, with 30 minutes for lunch and 15 minutes outside each day, for a total of 35 hours a week, and then enjoy coming home to do homework. But in my experience, these kids are few and far between. As an adult, working 40 hours a week has been a challenge, but children do it all the time. And for those who don't thrive in that environment (have you ever met one who doesn't want school vacation or even a snow day?), school is something to be dreaded. Now, with much of the school day being spent on computerized devices, those who are technologically challenged struggle even more.

But what is a parent to do? By the time kindergarten age came around, I was so desperate to go grocery shopping by myself (my girl would throw a tantrum if she was not the one to set off the automatic door sensor, and there were two sets of doors) that I decided to send her to public school and hope for the best. Alternative schools were not in my budget, and I would have preferred something that wasn't five days a week (three to four seems like plenty!), but I was also paying hefty school taxes, so why not? And she did okay. She didn't love it, and she was exhausted, but she was okay.

Now What?

But when life changes disrupted our living situation, I decided it was time to

homeschool. Homeschooling takes a lot of time—so much one-on-one time, so much time trying to keep her occupied while I worked, constantly juggling. But there was also so much freedom. We loved not being tied to the relentless daily and hourly schedule of being in school. There was a lot of good in that, but she was also becoming bored. After a couple of years, back to public school she went. This certainly opened opportunities, but it also took so much time—so much homework, so much computer time, and stress, and crying, and exhaustion. After Covid came and school switched to online learning (and later to two days in school and three days online), the death knell of my daughter's public-school education rang.

We were at a loss about what to do. Computers are not her thing. She needs to move, be in the fresh air, feel her toes in the mud. Then the blessing that is New Roots dropped into my inbox. As I read the curriculum, I thought it had been written specifically for my child. When I read it to her, she responded with so many yeses. As I signed the “knife waiver,” I knew she was about to begin a magical year.

I think often about John Lennon's response when asked what he wanted to be when he grew up. He said “happy” and was told he misunderstood the question. Who doesn't want to be happy? While public school is great at teaching kids to follow rules and eat as quickly as possible so they might get an extra minute outside, how many kids are learning to cultivate happiness? Is their creativity being fostered or squelched? Are they encouraged to explore their ideas? Maybe, but only till the end of science class; then they must switch to social studies. With learning so compartmentalized, it's no wonder that many kids struggle at becoming adults. They have not had the opportunity to live life as it is—messy, mixed together, unpredictable.

The Messy, Unpredictable Business of Learning

New Roots is very messy (so much mud), mingled (all ages learning together), and unpredictable. (My daughter just asked what I was writing. I replied, “What New Roots means to me.” She said, grinning widely, “Probably means a lot of laundry to you.”) Yes and no (she likes to wear the same clothes every day, and she's going to get dirty anyway, so...). As more and more of the work that used to be done by hand is now done by machines and computers, it is important for kids to learn that life is mixed up and messy; it doesn't come in 40-minute blocks of separate subjects with people of the same age.

Happiness in life is a measure of success, and to create it, finding a vocation that lights one up is key. The days of time clocks and factory work that our school system was set up to cater to are disappearing. As a very active person in the business world, I see the most successful people creating their own careers. They rely on creativity, flexibility, problem-solving, communication, and adaptation. These skills are real-world skills and learning them early makes life so much

easier. Seeing these emerge as the main lessons at New Roots has given me such confidence that she is learning the things she needs to learn. Her confidence in her abilities has grown immeasurably, and she is constantly creating. And the joy. A joyful child is so nice to live with.

Prickly Preteens

Twelve is such a prickly age. (I know for me it was one of the worst years of my life.) At the beginning of the school year, a New Roots teacher told me that prickly preteens are some of his favorite people. What a surprise! And a relief. I knew she would be in good hands. I can't say she doesn't have her prickly moments or challenges, but I can say that she tells me she is happier than she's ever been. For a 12-year-old girl to say that blows my mind. And keeps me so grateful. She is thrilled to go to school every day and brims with the events of the day when I pick her up. What a departure from the days of dragging her out of bed and seeing a sullen, fresh-air-starved child at the end of the day. Now, school vacations are hard because all I hear is, "I wish I could go to school today."

As an entrepreneur, my main business and life goal is freedom. I've never fit well in the "system." I felt so confined by it as a teenager that I quit high school, giving up a full scholarship to a prestigious boarding school. My life challenge has been to be creative enough that I can prosper living outside the box. I've had to retrain pretty much everything I learned in school in order to do this. Now, in my 40s, I'm still working on it. A few weeks ago, my daughter told me that she could never go back to public school because it would involve giving up her freedom. Apparently, we are related.

Finding Joy and Freedom at 12

For her to recognize freedom as a priority at age 12 boosted my parental confidence in such a huge way. New Roots has truly given her freedom—freedom to explore, to create, to laugh, and get messy. Freedom to be herself. I'm pretty sure freedom is not in the standards that are laid out for kids to learn and be tested on, but from my perspective, it is one of the most important things to learn—how to recognize it, foster it, nurture it. I had never thought happiness would be something one learns in school, but at New Roots, it abounds.

At this point, our biggest fear related to education is that New Roots won't survive. My girl has never felt so honored by her teachers, free to be herself, respected for her knowledge and passions, seen as a teacher in her own right, and connected with kids of all ages. She is empowered and supported to try new things and feels committed to an organization. In addition to being the happiest she's ever been, she is also the most confident she's ever been.

She has the best mentors, people she truly looks up to and learns from. Her gift for connecting with younger kids has been recognized and expanded. She was asked to be a counselor in training for a Willowell summer camp. Talk about

confidence boosting! She takes joy in all her New Roots assignments, even silly, inscrutable spelling assignments. I get to see her reveling in her school experience, building friendships, and anticipating her days with joy and excitement.

She is part of building something magical, having taken an active role in building the community, even the structures they learn in. This has given her a sense of ownership and a foundation embedded in the New Roots community. Her experience has been life-changing for both of us. I am excited to see where she will take her skills as she continues to grow into who she is. Until now, she has never mentioned having a goal about what she wants to be when she grows up. This year has convinced her that she wants to become a teacher at New Roots. I look forward to seeing how the New Roots kids will contribute to our ever-evolving society!

Dr. Elizabeth Davidson is a lifelong Vermonter. She and her daughter, Elena, have hiked the entire Long Trail, and between them, they can name most of the plants and many of the mushrooms that grow there. A former teacher, she has a passion for education, especially the kind where you can learn by experience. As a holistic doctor, she now has a virtual practice where she helps people all over the world solve chronic illness, rebuild their well-being, and recognize the wonders of being alive. She and Elena live in a yurt that is decorated with feathers, river stones, and bones.

CHAPTER 9

Into the Healing Arms of the Forest

By Cory Hayes, Founding Core Teacher

Transporting from one world to another is the best way to describe my experience with the New Roots Project.

My customary institutional setting for the last 20-plus years scarred my psyche to the point of muteness. With the Covid pandemic at my heels, I was finally able to escape the discomfort and duress I have experienced in public schools, for adults and children, causing me to rethink life and thrust forth into the healing arms of the forest. Many children at the New Roots Project were also given the opportunity to grow and to heal, while other families succumbed to the boundary-filled battleground of public schools. Here are some short paragraphs to describe my reflective moments:

The azure sky was clear beyond a few streaks of clouds as three caws cried out. Mountains aglow in a rainbow of fall colors nestled by the warmth of a laughter-filled day in the forest. The first streak of black was followed by two birds following in distress. Parents stood by, reveling in the autumn-filtered sun, without words but clearly yearning to be part of the flow created by this delightful crew of tree-hugging adults and children.

Behind our masks we were all smiles after an exhausting day tromping among young trees, stretched to the max by five-year-olds climbing and writhing around during a game in which we camouflage like animals to sneak up on our prey. Practicing to “be still” is difficult but being camouflaged to hide from a seven-year-old is the work of a true Ninja. The ecstasy of the game goes on as long as no one is injured, and enough children remain in the ebb of the thrilling adventure

to see who the best is at hiding undetected. The smell of pine needles and burning maple fills everyone’s lungs and reminds us of our fuel to stoke up for another day in the woods.

Richness abounds here with diverse learning opportunities never found indoors. Kids make masks and act out a play in fields among sculptures that appear to be from another planet. Creativity and non-ordinary transformations happen, as shy children become sword-fighting champions according to their own rules. Who would think an almost 50-year-old could hula hoop with two gigaton hoops using both arms? Fire building is as common as breathing, and knife skills are the heart. There are no medications, no labels, no limits to the time children spend exploring their inner primary mystical experience. Procedures like learning math, which start as a terrible chore and send kids running to the blue palace (porta potties that require a 20-minute walk), ultimately become a skill mastered with intensity and curiosity.

The children at New Roots are allowed to create with their minds a flow that supports their intellectual growth without a forced cutoff or intrusion. New Roots is a life-changing experience for anyone brave enough to walk down into the woods, to be vulnerable, and to feel the effortlessness of the forest’s power to heal.

Cory Hayes has a master’s degree in special education, specializing in learning disabilities, from Fordham University. She received her BA in literacy and communications with a minor in education from Pace University. She also has focused training from the Stern Center for Language in Orton-Gillingham and Wilson Reading System. Cory has spent her professional career in Vermont schools working as a special educator and has volunteered in programs like Girls on the Run and Special Olympics. Cory incorporates games, mindfulness, and multi sensory activities into her sessions to help build relationships and promote student focus and enjoyment of learning.

She recently moved to South Carolina from Vermont for sunshine and her love of the outdoors. In her free time, she is learning to surf, pursuing locations to photograph beautiful wildlife, reading, and cooking amazing food with her family.

CHAPTER 10

I Heard the Kids Shrieking and Laughing Through the Woods

By Addison Tate, AmeriCorps Member

From my vantage point near the serenity of the Walden Project’s fire pit, in the fall of 2020, New Roots to me was a chorus of distant, echoing laughter and playful shrieks, glimpses of a constantly evolving village of yurts and fire pits, and a handful of interactions with some shy yet sassy frog-pursuers. As an AmeriCorps member serving at the Walden Project, a partnership between Vergennes High School and the Willowell Foundation, I was steeped in its creative, angsty, politically engaged, colorful community of high schoolers. But as Walden marched through the depths of winter, I was called in to join as a rotating substitute for our neighbor in the woods, New Roots, one semester after it began.

Drawing on my background of ecological education, I jumped in to engage the children with activities on trees, mosses, wetlands, and tracking. Designed as sensory explorations, the activities were made possible by the meadows, ponds, swamps, streams, and cedar-dominated post-agricultural forest on Willowell’s land. Certainly, my Vermont upbringing biases me: I find the beauty of this state to be sublime yet humble, not nearly as stark and dramatic as the American West or other natural wonders of the world, but more subtle and gentle in its presentation. The area of Monkton, Vermont, where New Roots is based, epitomizes this. Wispy layers of mist float above the valley’s wetlands; swallows loop and flit just beyond reach; and in the winter, snow muffles sound and provides contrast to dark bark and bright berries. Growing up here, I took this beauty for granted, helping it now to sneak up on me and catch me in moments of awesome surprise and rediscovery.

Aided by this landscape, exploratory activities at New Roots came to life. The students’ inquisitive enthusiasm often took ideas in directions I hadn’t imagined as we engaged in playful learning. Encouraged by the New Roots staff to teach what was interesting to me, I facilitated lessons that were student-centered, nature-based, and wonder-infused. I frequently employed a learning cycle format developed by the Beetles Project, an online collection of teaching resources. This five-part cycle facilitates students’ exploration, connection, open-mindedness, and sense of relevance to their experiences.

Our Wonder-Infused Lessons

One damp day in late spring, I adapted the Beetles learning cycle to create the lesson below, called “Get Mossed”:

1. Invitation: Students are asked to bring forth something of their own experience or creation that relates to the topic.

Share out to the group or pair-share: If you were the size of an ant living in a forest, where in the forest would you like to live? Hand out slips of paper and have students write: What is a question you have about moss, or something you already know about it? Instructors collect slips and students may share out loud if they want.

2. Exploration: Encourage students to ask questions, make connections, and use as many senses as possible. Rather than presenting facts, instructors guide students to answer open-ended prompts such as “I notice... I wonder... It reminds me of...”

With a partner and a hand lens, explore the mosses of the area. Instructors may ask ahead of time or while checking in on groups, Where does moss grow and not grow? How high and low does it grow? How many different types of mosses do you see? What makes them different from each other? How do you know you are looking at moss? What does it smell like, sound like, feel like?

3. Concept Invention: Drawing on the exploration process, students and instructors develop connections and hypotheses and announce revelations. Instructors may introduce new ideas, while keeping the emphasis on the knowledge the students and the group generate.

As a group, discuss the exploration, asking students to share out what they were exploring. Encourage different voices and ideas and seek connections, not conclusions. Weave in facts about moss and hand

students relevant slips of paper with moss facts or questions (these can be student-generated slips from earlier and instructor-written slips from before the lesson) as the ideas become relevant.

4. Application: An activity requires students to employ what has been learned so far. This may be a game, skit, scientific test, craft, art creation, discussion, model building, exploration, journal prompt, series of movements, and so on.

Get Mossed game: In teams, hide your slips of paper with moss facts next to mosses within a designated area. The other team(s) must find the slips of paper and bring them back to the group, announcing the fact or question on the slip. Each subsequent round should involve a different focus: Hide the slips near the driest/wettest area of moss you can find, near your favorite patch of moss, near the thickest/thinnest moss, near the area where you think there are the most species of moss, near where you would live if you were ant sized, near moss with something growing out of it. Adjust competitiveness, team size, and game ending based on the group's needs.

5. Reflection: This may involve discussion, a single word, a dance move, journal prompt, expression of feeling, song, skit, pointing at, or art piece that asks students to reflect on something they learned, or a favorite or least favorite, a surprise, how they will use this knowledge moving forward, or some other prompt that helps students connect their new learning back to themselves.

What is something that surprised you? Would you change your answer about where to live if you were ant sized? What will you think about next time you see moss? Make a face or dance move that shows how you feel about moss. What could you tell your sibling about moss?

New Roots is the perfect place to facilitate lessons inspired by this format. The 45- to 90-minute activity periods in the morning and afternoon fit nicely; students choose the lessons they are interested in, resulting in engaged groups of 5–15; the student-centered culture of New Roots primes students for curiosity, fun, and empowerment; and I have already waxed poetic about the dynamic landscape. The other teachers at New Roots lead fascinating lessons based on their experience and interests, student desire, and longer-term curriculum planning and subject rotation. I imagine as a student it would be hard to choose between basket weaving, writing and acting in a play, learning about positive pressure through tree tapping (and tasting!), reenacting historical events, having a hands-on

cultural math lesson, or building balancing sculptures. Many styles of learning are supported during lessons, free play, individual tutoring, and community meetings. Use of tactile learning and individualized education facilitates accessibility for neurodiverse students. The daily structure provides clarity and expectations, while leaving plenty of room for the day to unfold according to the needs of students and staff.

Building Rapport and Trust

I will not pretend that students are never distracted, don't bicker, and are cherubically playful and respectful all the time. Conflicts arise and may be fleeting or may develop over weeks. Because New Roots weaves social and emotional health together with academic learning, there is space to respond and adapt. The sense of community grows throughout the year, both deliberately and organically, as students and staff build rapport. Students have a number of different trusted adults and peers to turn to. The range of ages, from early elementary to early high school, facilitates leadership roles and allows students to exist and expand at their pace, unlimited by grade level. When the group faces a challenge, the group can also solve it because students are empowered to do so and are encouraged to be aware of their role in creating a community. Facing challenges caused by Covid and tricky social dynamics that inevitably arise, New Roots proved to be incredibly resilient in its first year.

Throughout the school year, New Roots built infrastructure, procured funding, and planned for its future. I took part in planning sessions and was inspired to be working with a devoted team of pragmatic dreamers. At points it struck me how deeply the Willowell Foundation, as an organization, is built from the people within it and for the community it serves. As planning meetings unfolded, it was clear that New Roots would not become a structure that families and staff must fit within, but rather a structure built to fit the needs of its families and staff. This means planning around staff pregnancy and livelihood, seeking input from families, reflecting deeply on ideological pedagogical pillars, and recognizing the mosaic of other local schools in order to work in cooperation rather than competition.

Creating Accessibility of All Types

Recognizing the accomplishments that New Roots staff, students, and parents have made turning this immensely risky dream into a reality, I also recognize there is always work to be done in the realm of diversity, equity, and inclusion. New Roots already supports these ideals in myriad ways. In efforts to create an economically accessible program, no students were turned away due to lack of funds—a risky but infinitely worthwhile endeavor, even when grants were a gamble not a guarantee. Over \$10,000 in scholarships in the first two sessions, as well as work-trade arrangements gave families tuition relief. While physical

accessibility at Willowell is challenging, we built up our infrastructure through a new gravel road for vehicles and a walking path through the edible forest, with hopes for further improvements on the horizon. Transportation to Willowell's land in Monkton proved difficult for some families, so carpooling systems were arranged to meet that need. Teachers and staff extended their time and resources in countless ways to ensure that students were equipped with gear and other necessities for this unconventional learning experience.

In daily life at New Roots, the staff are considerate and proactive in creating a welcoming and inclusive academic and social culture. On the academic front, teachers engage students in local history and global cultural awareness. New Roots is a fertile environment to continue to incorporate social-justice education covering limitless topics, from considering Willowell's existence on unceded Abenaki land, to awareness and inclusion of Vermont's migrant farmworkers, to addressing environmental issues, to age-appropriate reflections on privilege and roles in community. Socially, teachers model compassionate communication, cultivate emotional literacy, and lead activities that question traditional gender expectations. The student-centered environment allows individuals to exist in a community that supports trans and non-binary students and encourages student leadership of all genders. Racially, the student and staff populations look similarly homogenous to Vermont's overall demographics, though it is important to recognize the many BIPOC Vermonters who call the counties served by New Roots home. Continued efforts, such as expanding outreach avenues and community partnerships (made difficult by Covid), would help invite more BIPOC students to New Roots.

I hope New Roots maintains a concerted emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion, not as endpoints, but as evolving ideals that flow through the educational community. Active and deliberate efforts are necessary to reach and support marginalized children in Vermont, and New Roots has the capacity to do so. I hope New Roots will continue to find creative solutions to expand access to the land, keep its programming socially aware, and build upon the supportive and dynamic community it has already established.

Getting as Muddy as Possible

Throughout the academic year, I continued to work primarily with the high schoolers at Walden, spending some days or half days at New Roots. This comparison provided an insightful and amusing opportunity to better understand the two communities and age groups. Both circled around similar themes in their own contexts: fairness, balance, equity, voice, resilience, reciprocity, communication, understanding, acceptance, and empowerment. And both slid along spectrums and questioned dichotomies of genuineness/performativity, silliness/sincerity, self/community, and structure/freedom. A morning spent at Walden discussing opportunities for restorative justice in the

U.S. judicial system might be followed by an afternoon at New Roots helping students respond to a "they stomped on my tree fort!" situation.

As New Roots grew throughout the year, it also played a key role in establishing Willowell's new Edible Forest Pathway. Funded by a New Perennials Project grant, two rows of about 70 fruit and nut trees and shrubs now border the footpath down to the sites of New Roots, Walden, and Willowell's sculpture garden. I took the lead on this project and engaged New Roots and Walden Project students in workdays to help prepare the soil, plant trees, and water the new plants. This last task was significant, as we had to carry water uphill from a pond using five-gallon buckets, a chore that two AmeriCorps members could complete in a few hours or that 20 students and staff could complete in half an hour. I remember arriving at Willowell one day with the intention of recruiting a New Roots watering crew and saw that all the New Roots students and staff were already watering, as they had incorporated it into their gardening time. They did an especially good job at the most important part: getting as muddy as possible.

I am grateful to have taken part in the inception of New Roots during the pandemic. It has given students and staff a consistent yet adaptable in-person community that was otherwise hard to find. The creation of the physical, social, academic, and emotional aspects of New Roots holds true to the concept of emergence: that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. This was visualized in our closing ceremony, where students and staff tossed a ball of yarn to someone across the circle and expressed an appreciation. The many strands crisscrossing the circle created a web of connection. The momentum from the achievements of this community, despite and in response to the pandemic, is already carrying New Roots forward, and I can almost hear next year's playful shrieks and laughter echoing in the not-too-distant future.

Addison Tate's work with youth in ecology, agriculture, and social systems took him from the lakes and forests of the Champlain Valley and the Adirondacks to the Hudson Valley, to the rocky coast of Northern California, and back home to Addison County, Vermont. He graduated from Vassar College with a degree in environmental studies, and he brings the lenses of nonviolent communication and emergent strategy to his work. Addison served as an AmeriCorps service member at Willowell for two years, working with the Walden Project, summer camp, and land-based projects, which led to his current roles as assistant director at New Roots and Pond Brook. His experiences as an outdoor educator have trained him in contemplative and ecological principles essential to Willowell's new programs. His teaching is multisensory, musical, somatic, student-centered, and driven by curiosity, play, and humor.

CHAPTER 11

At Play in a Cedar Wood

By Eric Warren, Founding Core Teacher

Ada's Phenomenal Raspberry Fluff

This traditional Artemisian recipe lends itself to numerous substitutions; however, we recommend following the recipe precisely, as unforeseen results may occur with even minor changes.

Gather the following ingredients:

One box of wooden kitchen matches.

One flint and steel, scavenged from a “survival kit” (that contains very few things important for actual survival).

One old piece of straight-grained wood, preferably a broken piece of a yurt lattice wall.

One dull carving knife and a variety of woodworking scoops, chisels, and drawknives.

A selection of whet and oil stones and leather strops (along with appropriate sharpening compounds).

One hastily scraped-together shaving horse.

A blunt wooden mallet (preferably cut from a four-inch cedar log using hand saws with at least three different tooth patterns and carved with the above collection of tools).

One stump from a large pine log (any stump lying around will do, but it shouldn't be too punky).

One old, dented frying pan with a loose handle, found in an abandoned fire pit in the woods.

Two teaspoons of charcoal from the bottom of a rain-soaked fire pit.

One bag of recently harvested fresh raspberries that has been smashed at the bottom of a lunch box.

Several marshmallows (also smashed at the bottom of a lunch box).

One pound of freshly harvested nettles.

A large pile of sticks, moss, green branches, birch bark, dry kindling, pine needles, fluff from dried milkweed seed pods, and forest-floor detritus gathered in haste (having some material that will actually burn is a plus, but variability is key here for good flavor imparted by the smoke seasoning).

One group of animated adolescents who are alternately throwing half-rotten logs on the fire, in complete disregard for any cooking going on, and running off to compose one-act comic tragedies in the woods, where most of the characters don't survive to the end of the act.

Several teachers knowledgeable about obscure cultural practices of people from remote parts of the world, fire-building techniques, theater archetypes, knife sharpening, and ratios.

Optional: individually wrapped hazelnut chocolates won in a shell game used by the math teacher to demonstrate the effects of a non-random removal on the probability of random selection.

Preparation:

Beginning with the coarsest whetstone, sharpen the carving knife and chisels, progressing through each grit and on to the leather strops. When done, check the sharpness of each tool by slicing through a piece of paper that has gotten damp from sitting out in the woods under a tarp for three weeks.

Realize that each successive grit has made the tools duller rather than sharpening them. Go back to step 1.

When tools are sharp, carve the piece of wood into a spoon. Use the stump as a workbench and maintain a proper carving “bubble” at all times by yelling at anyone who stumbles through to “watch out—I'm carving here!” It is best if the handle is longer than the bowl of the spoon.

Remove leaves from the nettle stalks by sliding them between your finger and thumb, going up the plant stalk. If you do touch the plants the wrong way and get stung, don't let on to anyone. Pound the stalks on the stump using the wooden mallet and separate the pith from the outer skin. Using techniques you have learned in cordage class, make about 10 feet of cord.

Prepare coals for cooking by starting to gather neat piles of cedar fluff, birch bark, “mouse tails,” “rat tails,” and larger-sized sticks from standing dead

trees, while other camp members start burning up the birch bark and other tinder using the majority of the matches in the box.

Decide that “hey, we should be able to do this with one match!” and, since most of the matches are gone, begin sparking the flint and steel over a pile of tinder. Continue for 20 minutes.

Using the nettle cord, devise some sort of system for keeping all ingredients safe from roaming, hungry dogs and go off with a group of actors into the woods to warm up voices, bodies, and psyches for the big show with Gabby. In the workshop with Meghan, make a mask out of cardboard, sticks, and other objects found in nature to help you project some aspect of your being out into the world.

Get really hungry.

Back at the fire pit, suppress the rumbles in your belly to focus on making a proper fire, starting with the smallest pieces of fluff and progressing through the tiniest sticks on up through finger-sized kindling to make a beautiful work of art. Touch a single match to the little piece of birch bark you put in the center and watch the flame spread. Blow gently at the base of the fire (masks on everyone else!) and slowly add more kindling, listening for just the right crackling sound as you build warmth and larger flames. Add some larger logs and nurse the glowing embers at the bottom of the fire for the next hour or so while you eat everything you brought that you don't need to cook.

When the fire is raging, stick the frying pan into the middle of the fire to “season” it. Wait for smoke to stop coming from whatever is burned onto the pan from previous attempts to cook on it, and then, just before it turns cherry red, remove from the fire (using whatever tools you can find around to keep from melting the skin of your hand) and let cool.

After brushing the pan with pine needles to remove any residue, pour raspberries from the plastic bag into the frying pan, systematically squeezing and rolling the plastic bag to get all juice out.

Wipe excess raspberry juice that is dripping down your hands onto the legs of your overalls.

Start to heat your frying pan over whatever part of the fire has some actual coals to cook over, while carefully dodging other cooks who are attempting to free their foil-wrapped potatoes (if you are cooking on a Thursday or Friday; on Monday and Tuesday you have to watch out for potatoes) from the bowels of the fire, using combinations of sticks and fire tongs, which all result in flipping the precious objects into other parts of the fire several times before getting them out. This process is important, as charcoal is

slowly added to the raspberries naturally while everyone vies for the best position around the flames, smoke, and coals.

Stir bubbling raspberries until they begin to thicken.

Remove from heat and add marshmallows, one at a time, returning the pan to the flame each time, stirring until smooth and frothy.

When the color is the correct shade of pinkish gray (you will know when this happens), the fluff is ready. Find a comfortable rock to sit on (or a bench made of a triangular slab of wood nailed to two logs), lean back against a tree, pull your hood over your head, hold the frying pan up to your mouth, and begin scooping fluff into your mouth with a stick while giggling enthusiastically. Wipe excess sticky goo from the sides of your mouth on the sleeve of your Carhart jacket. Do not share with anyone else since we are in the middle of a pandemic.

Optional: Eat the hazelnut chocolate if the above process doesn't work out.

The Woods Around Us Magically Transform

The first real rains came at night, when we weren't at camp. The dry creek bed that ran right next to our tarped workshop was running full when we got there the next morning. Sharp woodworking tools that had been so beautifully arranged on workshop walls made of cedar poles and old piano pieces were buried in the muck after the tarp collapsed under the weight of pooling rain. Fred, the wooden duck that one ambitious child was carving, half-floated in a puddle with scattered staves and other wooden objects. The fresh smell of the damp forest floor was new and mixed with the scent of wet charcoal from the fire-pit area.

The defects in our hastily erected shelter were now glaring, and the morning was spent cleaning up the mess. There were a few grumbles about having to redo our work, but that quickly turned to excitement as kids each began to jump in with their ideas about how to tarp our camp the right way. We collected stones to anchor paracord to our plastic roof and climbed trees to pull it tight, positioning it just right to let us sit near the fire in the rain without melting our plastic roof.

After Ethan's first geologic-history class, I made a very convincing argument that “Isostatic Rebound Camp” would be a very appropriate name for the older kids' camp, which we had carved out of this dark part of the forest. But it was the goddess of the hunt and wildness that our young adolescent tribe was drawn to rather than the wisdom of their teacher, and we were dubbed “Camp Artemis.”

Between classes in which we spun wool into yarn (with lots of historical narrative around the importance of fiber technology in human evolution) from Casey, stories of great mathematicians and trickster animals told by Ethan, wilderness medicine and knife-safety lessons by Meghan, Gabby's dramatic theater warm-ups, Ian's archeology demonstrations, Cory's trips to our camp with the “Littles” to “steal” our fire (or, bring us fire when ours had gone out),

and discussions about the terminal velocity of falling cats, the woods around us magically transformed. Platforms made of cedar poles began appearing in the trees along with shelters covered in green boughs. Saws and wooden signs were hung in trees. The little stream became a series of little pools with bridges made of cedar poles. Jump ropes were tied to trees, and every stick on the forest floor was evaluated for its potential as a sword.

Our days had some order to them, but it was often hard to see through the chaotic interplay between cedar branches, the sound of screws being stripped by a screw gun, and bizarre stories being acted out around us. Some of us spent a lot of time just sitting on a log, in the smoke of a fire, discussing important aspects of educational theory or our extended pet families. Several kids had carved out their spot in a nook of a tree or a big rock just beyond the fire circle and were engrossed in a book. And, occasionally a teacher would hoot or holler or cackle or yodel to assemble everyone for the next piece of the day, or a child could be heard pleading to take a group over to the mud pit down the trail that served as the swimming hole.

How Is This Not School?

After a particularly heated exchange between students vying for the same sit stump and a teacher intervention that still hung in the air in a way that felt heavy and awkward, we launched into a discussion of how our day here together is, and is not, like school. “We have rules here,” I said, “and we learn things, and we expect things from you. How is this not school?” It was hard to put our finger on: “If I brought a knife out in class to carve a stick, I would be sent home,” was one answer, or “My teacher would be constantly hovering, making sure I am doing just what I am supposed to,” or “We are free here...well, not totally, but still, it feels free out here in the woods.”

None of it really captured the difference. We were dancing around just what the difference was, but we were getting there. Being outside was a big piece of it. It seemed to involve the low-stakes nature of our academic day, combined with the higher stakes of the natural world and some degree of agency for the kids that they don't feel in other settings—mixed with the fire and the knives and the tree climbing. The clash over the stump came up again, and we grappled a bit with the idea that the teacher still has to be in charge out here—to be the final arbiter and make up a lot of the rules whether the kids like it or not. While there are some rules that the kids don't agree with, student voice is highly valued here, and we only need the rules that are going to allow us to function and get safely through our day. We are not removed from the reasons those rules exist—they are right before our faces, out in nature, not in some state office, or being debated by board members somewhere. Consequences and rewards can be more direct here, for example when fingers burn and toes get cold. We still deal with

adolescent resentment and teacher frustration, but it is hard for kids to disengage too much.

I don't think that any of us intentionally set out to create the precise program that we did this past year in the Willowell woods. We wouldn't have thought that putting kids with such a large age range together, some for one day a week while others attended all five, would work very well. Sometimes, we were frustrated by the lack of consistency, the varying academic needs, and the differing pedagogical styles of the teaching staff, but we pushed through it all. We came to some new understandings about the way that learning happens, out here in the cedar forest, among the gnarled roots and animated branches that have their own agenda for how a “school” day should go.

Eric Warren has taught science, health, outdoor skills, tool use, and building design to young people since 2001, with a focus on fostering a connection between students, the natural world, and the communities they are helping to build. He is happiest mucking through swamps, following a compass or rigging some wild contraption out of parts and pieces of old machines to study the workings of the universe. He also loves to sit around a fire talking about ideas, understanding, and inspirations. Student empowerment, creativity, exploration, and a strong connection to everyday life are as important as adherence to science and evidence-based belief in his class. He believes that a teacher's main job is to help connect each student with their own, unique brilliance and passions.

Eric holds a BA in community studies from the University of California, Santa Cruz, an MA in social ecology from Goddard College, and a Vermont teaching license for middle grades science.



TOP: The path down to campus in the early winter morning shows boot prints, ski tracks, and sled trails from students' and teachers' daily migrations. **BOTTOM LEFT:** June, Cole, and Elena harvest sheets of snow and construct an archway, one of many snow sculptures and architectures on campus. **BOTTOM RIGHT:** The big yurt and backpack rack await students' arrival after an overnight storm left downy snow blanketing the campus. *(Photos by Meghan Rigali)*



LEFT: The Spring Wild Edibles cooking series yields freshly sautéed fiddleheads and spring garlic over the fire during morning circle. **TOP RIGHT:** During his St. Patrick's Day scavenger hunt, Ian Gramling shows students an example of how a leprechaun may have been depicted historically. **BOTTOM:** It's story time at the fire during lunch. Wolf Pack and Chickadee students, with Cory Hayes, listen intently as Casey Burger weaves a tale. *(Photos by Meghan Rigali)*



A mandala-making workshop celebrates autumn beauty and its diverse color palette. Students gather their “paints” from nature’s tool kit—ferns, acorns, maple leaves, and more. At the end of the day, they make one large mandala together. *(Photo by Meghan Rigali)*



TOP: Meghan Rigali engages Camp Artemis students in a team-building challenge to form a star using a rainbow rope without speaking. **BOTTOM LEFT:** Casey Burger teaches a student to make thread from raw wool during a section about string, its history, and how to make it. *(Photo by Meghan Rigali)* **BOTTOM RIGHT:** While Camp Artemis students are engaged in creating a human compass on the land, a young student improvises this botany catalog. *(Photo by Meghan Rigali)*

CHAPTER 12

Forest Bathing and the Festival of Dionysus

By Gabrielle Schlein, Visiting Artist

The year of 2020 called for radical antidotes, and so Willowell answered with the New Roots Project. I can think of no better way to remedy Covid-induced burnout than New Root's championing of "Shinrin-Yoku." This Japanese phrase, which translates directly to "forest bathing," is defined as "making contact with and taking in the atmosphere of the forest" (Park et al). This program allowed children and teachers alike to integrate this ancient practice of Shinrin-Yoku into our everyday lives, since each day would begin and end with a leisurely stroll to the pine grove classrooms.

Incorporating forest bathing into our routine becomes vital when you consider a study from the EPA, which states that most Americans spend 93 percent of their time indoors (Li). This disconnect from nature has serious implications for our mental and physical health; kids who spend too much time in front of screens develop vision loss and experience increased social anxiety. It can be alluring to align technological advancement with progress, especially since culture reinforces this idea through capitalistic norms, but the latest gadget can never replace a nourishing educational setting. Thankfully Willowell provided just that!

In October 2020, I was invited to the New Roots Project to teach theater for a three-week module. I was stunned the first time I visited the project site. It was hard to believe that a few meetings in a gazebo had led to a bustling campus nestled within these woods. I observed in awe as children scampered up trees barefoot, roasted apples over the fire, and carved tools with ease and precision.

For the theatrical component of New Roots, Meghan Rigali and I joined forces to create a curriculum in which students would produce their own plays with the use of improv, character archetypes, and masks. Since theater is an inherently collaborative art form, building a sense of trust as an ensemble was necessary. To do this, we played games that activated mirror neurons in the brain, which are responsible for releasing the bonding chemical oxytocin. Having students mirror each other's movements, known in the theatrical and dance community as the "Mirror Exercise," allows them to feel seen and validated by their peers, thus strengthening the group bond.

After building a sense of camaraderie, we moved on to the art of embodied archetypes. C. G. Jung coined 12 signature archetypes that are found in every story and human psyche, like that of "The Ruler," "The Sage," or "The Joker." Students were encouraged to adopt the movement of these characters and to consider the ways in which they walked or spoke. I could think of no better setting in which to explore sound and body than the woods of Willowell. Here, in the middle of the forest, kids could holler and howl as loudly as they pleased, granting them the opportunity to tap into buried sounds. Children could finally embrace their outdoor voices and fully inhabit themselves in this setting. You couldn't help but smile at the sight of them romping around the woods, whooping in the delight of being weird. There is real scientific merit behind the healing capabilities of oral expression, too, since creating vocal vibrations soothes the central nervous system. Embodied expression is a balm for our mental health, and nature provides the perfect context for this education to occur.

We then used the Jungian archetypes as a scaffolding for the children to explore their identities in improv. Students were emboldened to listen to their instincts in these improvisational exercises, which allowed them to explore alternate forms of intelligence. This is why I cherish the art of improv—its spontaneous nature encourages you to embrace intuition. Unfortunately, American society tends to value rationality and discipline over embodied knowledge. Thankfully artistic education can rectify this imbalance.

The students joyfully took to their archetypes and then worked with Meghan on their masks and props to help accentuate their characters. The forest of Willowell provided unlimited material, as they incorporated flowers, fallen tree branches, and acorns into their accoutrements.

The theater unit culminated in a "Festival of Dionysus," modeled after the Grecian theatrical tradition. The students were divided into small groups where they created their own short stories, integrating their knowledge of archetypes and improv. The woods of Willowell seem made for a Dionysian festival. The property is dotted with eccentric sculptures, old teepees, and fairy-like tree houses. We encouraged the students to create site-specific scenes in the diverse landscape, and so they incorporated pieces from the Gordon Sculpture Park into

their set. On the festival day, the children even cheerfully adapted to the rainy weather, improvising with the rhythms of nature.

It truly inspires me to see what a handful of educators can accomplish when given the right resources. Thank you to Willowell and all the core teachers for inviting me on this ride, uplifting the community with your righteous eco-education!

Gabrielle Schlein is a Brooklyn-based theater artist and filmmaker, born and raised in Addison County, Vermont. She is passionate about using storytelling as a vehicle for social and environmental justice and is a lover of all things avant-garde and experimental. She received her BA in theater from Connecticut College, where she was given a yearlong fellowship to study at the Lee Strasberg Theater and Film Institute to gain expertise in “Method Acting.” Gabrielle made her Off-Broadway debut as a director for the New York Theater Festival with the show *Capitexic*. She continues to work behind the scenes within the NYC film community. In addition, she studied theater with various domestic and international companies, such as One Year Lease (NYC), Pig Iron (Philadelphia), Kaddu Yaraak (Dakar, Senegal) and the National Theater School of Ireland (Dublin, Ireland).

CHAPTER 13

My Path to a Fluid, Regenerative Style of Education

By Meghan Rigali, Founding Core Teacher

Within the world of education, the state of Vermont is considered one of the last bastions of freedom for educators to teach from their source of personal passion in content area and approach. My path as an educator began as I worked one-on-one with at-risk youth, then designed after-school programs for metal arts, and then as a wilderness-therapy guide for adolescents in Vermont.

A theme that brought me close to the vitality of our current moment is the self-creation that rises when one fully meets and engages with the experience at hand. I discovered that living and teaching from an authentic place helps me more clearly define the invitation to learn for my students. For example, when I guide my students in a wilderness-therapy setting or in drawing classes, I emphasize that an intrinsically motivated, primary relationship is paramount: “Trust yourself in the process.” Then I witness epiphanies unfold from the source of the human being.

This message and core value are in stark opposition to a culture dominated by extrinsically motivated and performative behaviors. We must unlearn and learn again what it is to trust our own experience as the only way to become fully human and contribute our gifts to our communities. These kinds of gifts are of great value, rooted in the needs of our time.

Like the slow-food movement, the “unwinding” into authentic learning and living takes time because it must reintegrate what Bill Vitek calls the silos of education. As an interdisciplinary artist, I am also an interdisciplinary person, whose varied interests integrate within me and in my ability to contribute meaningfully to my community. The most formative education I know is

experiential and integrated—whether at the San Francisco Art Institute working with my blacksmith in his shop, or using ecopsychology practices such as speaking in council, or living in relationship to the elements as a wilderness-therapy guide. The practice of authenticity is founded in restorative, equal relationships among humans—humans participating in the web of life that is embodied in the wildflowers, geological stories, weather systems—in life itself.

Conducting Class from the Car

When the pandemic arose, I had already given my resignation to my current post as a high school art teacher. Previous work in other communities and with different leadership provided me with a unique reference point for the extraordinary potential of teaching to be a source of healing on an individual and collective scale. Self-creation and co-creation are themes at the heart of my work with students, teachers, leaders, and families.

Amidst the panic that overtook our community, I was teaching from home like other educators, but the online learning platform is not a place for experiential courses like studio art. Every day I invested long hours using every resource I could muster to orient myself, learn, and redesign my curriculum and communication approaches and processes. I could work for three 10-hour days, solving problems, creating, designing and implementing, and then it all would implode, and none of the work would be salvageable. As someone who enjoys being resourceful and competent, this was a unique frustration to encounter.

One day, I taught my art class while sitting inside my car in a McDonald's parking lot. I demonstrated contour line drawing in my sketchbook, talking to the computer video-camera propped up in the seat next to me. Why in the world would anyone do such a thing? I was on a two-hour drive one way to a computer specialist to invest in my personal computer so I could use it to teach my classes because the computer the school provided was insufficient. The frustration was paralyzing for me and my students. Attempting to teach on video or create video lessons for students to use as resources while they created in the absence of art supplies at home felt like an insurmountable task at the time. Yet, we all persevered.

Everyone simply does the best they can within any given moment, pandemic style. These circumstances give rise to a different kind of grace, which originates in the highly adaptive, creative, survival impulse.

Finding Renewal in Self-Care

When the pandemic took hold of our lives, all of us, in our collective communities, were in a sustained state of emergency and so, too, were our bodies. Our nervous systems were in a state of “fight or flight,” which directly interfered with our ability to assess and respond effectively to the stressful experiences at hand.

The turning point for me became the renewal of my self-care practices. At

the conclusion of my workday, I would close my computer and open the door to walks on the land, followed by a few hours of yoga and meditation. I was fortunate to have this space and time, as my husband and I were alone at home together. Though many variables tug at the quality of one's experience in the pandemic, it became clear to me that those who had established practices or were able to create a reliable practice to cultivate self-regulation were at a significant advantage.

Self-care practices are self-soothing and increase self-awareness. They directly cultivate and strengthen the parasympathetic nervous system, which predominates during rest and digestion. (The sympathetic nervous system drives our “flight or fight” responses to prepare us for imminent danger and is not a sustainable state of stimulation with which to live.) People can cultivate their parasympathetic nervous system through exercise, connecting with the natural world, tai chi, yoga, dance, meditation, making art or music, or simply listening to music.

Helping Students Nourish Their Brains and Souls

During the years preceding the pandemic, my drawing classes focused on how to cultivate “flow state,” providing teachings on neuroscience studies about MRI brain imaging of monks meditating and variations on how to enter the creative process. I introduced kinesthetic experiences like “the human knot” game, “cloud hands” from tai chi, automatic drawing, and classical drawing games from the masters, such as fast, timed gesture, contour, and blind drawings. Teaching in the pandemic gave me the blank paper to further explore and develop my teaching philosophy and approaches in a context that needed these connections to nourish the innate intelligences that humans possess naturally in a time of abiding stress. In my view, the “undoing” or “unwinding” of stress became an essential survival skill for everyone to practice.

Teaching art online in the pandemic was not only about the creative process and practice of technique but was also a mirror for learning and personal growth on the journey of the artist at any given time. Teaching art became the practice of art making. What is the set and setting of one's art practice? What do we need to do to prepare our space, our environment, and ourselves to practice art? How does one practice art? The nature and quality of this became the focus of my teaching.

A Spark and Sea Change

Just after I had posted my favorite final project for my high school students, George Floyd was murdered in front of our country. The pandemic and a terrifying national political environment were already upending our youths' internal and external worldviews.

The *New York Times* announced in a full-page article that the art house Amplifier had launched an “emergency campaign with top art curators and

public-health advisors from around the world . . . looking for symbols that help promote mental health, well-being, and social change work during these stressful times.”

My high school students had access to professional artists’ work, which inspired the legitimacy of their own art and activism. Their final 2020 student art and activism projects blew me away, not because everyone made a masterpiece of technical virtuosity, but emphatically because those who chose to and were able to engage gave voice to the powerful, personal, and collective experiences of our time. I am proud of my students, for their expressions crossed over into an elusive quality that defines great art, residing at the root of our human experience as “timeless.”

Wilderness Survival Had Become Essential

At New Roots, prior to leaving to earn a Wilderness EMT certification at SOLO in New Hampshire’s White Mountains, I taught an intensive week of required curriculum on winter survival to begin preparing students and teachers for the winter ahead. Rich discussions erupted around the fire in our open-air yurt. The Renaissance people who defined our teachers and students discussed wool-fiber applications in history to the present; clothing layering systems, with students modeling their gear; nutrition; and psychology in response to cold conditions. I designed and taught a course throughout the year to be in harmony with our curricular theme of “Home.”

Our Bodies and the Wild Land as Home

(Science, Health, Physical Education, Personal Development)

Course Description: Wilderness survival is a highly creative and resourceful wisdom that is shared with immediate rewards for the individual and the collective. While immersed in the natural world and seasons at New Roots, in this ongoing course we will learn about the rich intersection of creativity and human evolution, wilderness emergency medicine for kids, self-care, and a variety of related survival systems, such as clothing layering systems, gear, heat, water, and shelter. We will learn about the seven principles of Leave No Trace, defined by the Center for Outdoor Ethics, and explore introductory eco-psychology activities (sit spots in nature, wanders on the land, creative writing, art, and more) to inform HOW we create relationships with ourselves and the natural world. Our containers will be interactive lectures, games, theatrical scenarios for experiential learning and practice, as well as speaking in council or circle, using a talking stick to invest in the individual and collective voices and visions of our participants.

By the time I returned from New Hampshire, quarantining during Thanksgiving break, the Wilderness EMT Experiential Education course had

completed another interdisciplinary connection for me as a teacher. I continued to develop my curriculum, complemented by studies of the eight limbs of yoga as an early form of medicine, and to teach psychological and character-building principles, as well as the arts, dance, mindfulness, healthy communication, and eco-psychology.

My Narrative Evaluation of the Daily Life and Emergent Curriculum

Week 1, Session 2: Multi-aged students engaged in a comprehensive introduction to Wilderness Survival and Medicine for Kids.

A special focus is placed on defining thermoregulation and the application to real experiences within the context of student life at the Willowell land. We focused on the four kinds of heat transfer, connecting them directly to three primary expressions of thermogenesis through multiple learning modalities, such as interactive lectures, note taking, collaboration, experiential homework, and performances. These lessons translated into daily practices that empowered students to keep themselves warm, focus on metabolism, exercise, and behavior (conscious choices).

Students created individualized gorp recipes, brought their gorp with them to New Roots to enjoy—for survival and flavor—and established a gorp recipe library in the New Roots community. Students created and performed unique “boot dances” in teams to generate body heat and warm the toes when needed as winter progressed. Additionally, students were presented with wilderness-emergency-medicine scenarios focused on cold-related challenges and, as teams, created and performed skits that built skills and understanding about how to care for someone in need of support. This helped to encourage a culture of caring for our community.

Later in Session 2, we revisited these lessons, further playing a variety of games that allowed students to review the material and observe the learning they applied daily, by focusing on clothing layers and materials, or nutrition content in lunches that support metabolization for heat and electrolytes for hydration.

Sessions 2 and 3: The Daily Life and Emergent Curriculum specific to the creation of our winter campus, systems, practices, and roles provided a focus that furthered opportunities for students to apply their learning in context, as an extension of winter-wilderness learning in this class.

At the start of our day, students made fires in the yurt’s woodstove and in the outdoor fire pit. We held morning meeting check-ins, and students signed up for roles and responsibilities in the following areas of focus: Fire (starting, tending, extinguishing), Water (hydration reminders), Safety Wizards (general physical and emotional safety), Land Watchers (camp sweep for gear and garbage clean-up), and New Roots Tribe (everyone looks after each other).

Each day, students had opportunities to practice cultivating self-awareness; we conducted thermoregulation checks of fingers, toes, and core temperatures.

We addressed thermoregulation needs by supporting students with management of personal gear. We managed food and warm-fluid consumption for metabolization as heat source, warm handwashes and hand sanitization at key transitions, movement/exercise for heat source through free play, educational games, and exploring the land.

As we built the culture of outdoor survival and medicine into the New Roots student experience, students and teachers fostered morale, trust, communication, collaboration, and competency.

Meghan Rigali's bio can be found on page 11.

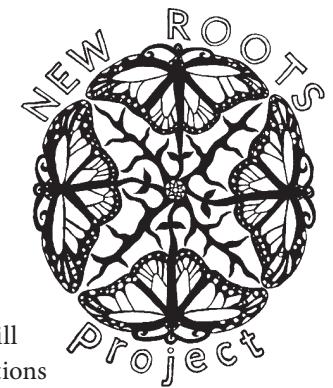
CHAPTER 14

The New Roots Project Mandala: Genesis and Purpose

By Meghan Rigali, Founding Core Teacher

The eight-pointed star seeds roots deep into earth and emerges outward to the sky. The milkweed plant grows plentifully on the Willowell land, and the caterpillars feast upon it to one day become vibrant Monarch butterflies.

Caterpillars hold imaginal buds within them that contain the blueprint for the butterfly they will become, in the way that we carry in our imaginations the power to dream ourselves and the world in which we yearn to live into being.



The Birth of an Essential Partnership and a Symbol

On behalf of the Willowell Foundation, Matt Schlein and I accepted the invitation to participate as community partners in the New Perennials Project at Middlebury College. At the time, we were engaged to be married and were teaching from home during the Covid pandemic. We were busy reinventing our respective curriculums to respond to the needs of the moment as experiential, public-school educators.

As we grappled with the dislocations caused by the worldwide pandemic, we began participating in New Perennials Project video meetings, speaking with those who would become essential community partners, who collectively steadied and inspired one another throughout the journey.

In the summer of 2020, the Willowell Foundation hosted the summer retreat for our colleagues in the New Perennials Project, many of us meeting in person for the very first time.

Nadine Canter opened the retreat with tai chi movement, syncing us with the elements and loosening our minds to receive the presence of place and time. Exhausted with the protocols of pandemic safety, we were all sinking into the relief of sharing the wordless riches of physical presence and the natural world.

In the cedar forest, while digesting conversations and lunch, we shifted our focus to Marc Lapin. Marc invited us to be chosen by a species, be surprised by who showed up—be it plant, animal, or ecological feature.

Our circle opened into the Council of All Beings, described by scholar, activist, and eco-philosophers Joanna Macy and John Seed this way: “The Council of All Beings is a communal ritual in which participants step aside from their human identity and speak on behalf of another life-form. A simple structure for spontaneous expression, it aims to heighten awareness of our interdependence in the living body of Earth, and to strengthen our commitment to defend it. The ritual serves to help us acknowledge and give voice to the suffering of our world. It also serves, in equal measure, to help us experience the beauty and power of our interconnectedness with all life.”

The Council of All Beings speaks with fierce grief. This subtle hot edge chastises human listeners for the violations, profound mistakes, ignorance and arrogance of humanity’s absent relationship with the web of life. Emerging from dark decay are also gifts—spontaneous deep wisdom from the multiplicity of voices that loosen more layers and seed powerful messages worthy of supple receipt.

Artist Statement

Our time is marked by a severed relationship between humans and their connection to their origin. We experience alienation from Nature. Will we accept the fate of origin orphans? My art insists that the deep intelligence of survival gave rise to human imagination and creativity, activating essential keys to human evolution.

I focus on the productive and destructive characteristics found both in Nature and human beings, the mythological expression of the psyche, and the elusive, primordial art of healing—to articulate the familiar experience of paradox, mirroring life as it is.

My materials range from organic to fabricated, such as artichoke petals, hair, grapevines, and clay forms to latex castings of tree bark, and metals. The work may take the form of drawing, collage, paintings, sculpture, installation, or performance. The combination and arrangement of, and the evidence of action or ceremony upon these materials, activate their significance as the lungs and heart do for the body.

The Mandala

The caterpillar-butterfly spoke through me in this Council of All Beings circle with a dancerly presence; its message described the process of metamorphosis for which it is known. In this arch from caterpillar to butterfly, the chrysalis stage punctuates the transformation literally and symbolically. Described by eco-depth psychologist and founder of Animas Valley Institute, Bill Plotkin:

“The transformational chrysalis phase is one of the great mysteries of biology. No one knows exactly how the caterpillar changes form in such a dramatic way. But this much is known: inside the caterpillar’s body are clusters of cells called, of all things, imaginal buds. Imaginal refers to the imago, the adult phase, but it also means “to imagine,” and psychologists use the word imago to mean an idealized image of a loved one, including the self. The imaginal buds contain the idealized image, the blueprint, for growing a butterfly. While the caterpillar goes about its earth-crawling business, these cells, deep inside are imagining flight.”

This is the story of how the butterfly found its place in the New Roots Project mandala, as the nested communities of human youth, adult partnerships, and the natural world found themselves imagining and reimagining together amidst a world in crisis.

The caterpillar-butterfly advised humanity to claim their imaginations and prepare for the struggle of emergence—a most delicate, perilous moment, when assistance is interruption and earning the emergence requires complete ownership of personal power.

“It is necessary that the weakness of the powerless is transformed into a force capable of announcing justice. For this to happen, a total denouncement of fatalism is necessary. We are transformative beings and not beings for accommodation.” —Paulo Freire

Meaghan Rigali’s bio can be found on page 11.

CHAPTER 15

Case Studies

By Meghan Rigali, Founding Core Teacher

Adel

My class offering is selected, theatrical readings of Pablo Neruda's Odes. The students will create odes to the natural world individually or in collaboration, and theatrical performances of those poems for class. This is a culmination of self-expression that aligns the senses and intelligences. We begin with a defining of praise and the power to cultivate appreciation in our odes to elements, geological features, weather systems, plants, animals, insects, amphibians, and perhaps a sunbeam through the tree leaves, like the sunbeams all around us in the forest at this very moment.

Adel begins boldly with confidence in her abilities and techniques and requests additional instruction while practicing art, fire building, or teaching a class on hip-hop choreography. She is highly competent, complex, generous, sensitive, and fierce as an individual, a leader, and one who influences the culture of the group experience on the days she attends New Roots.

However today, I know she is stirred up, having had recent conversations with her and her parents about the complicated feelings she has about her educational experiences. Knowing there are great teachers in our surrounding public schools, what is called to the foreground is what place, culture, approaches are the best fit for her as the unique human she is. As the children shift into their writing and development of ideas for an original ode, Adel looks to me with a pining expression, both defiant and tender. Gliding around the edge of the fire circle where we are gathered, I make my way to her side. "Talk to me. I see something is going on for you. What's inside?" She's full of angst and frustration around the act of writing, a recent mantra "I hate writing." But why then did she choose this class today? We have a bond she knows she can rely upon. "What if you wrote

your ode about hating to write?" Her eyes widened and a surge of her power guided her attention to this exploration.

She's looking for a word, sits at the slackline with a few other kids, and I join them for her in-process reading to support her search. One student is astounded by Adel's poem so far, so much depth and feeling and intelligence! She gestures in the air as though calling an invisible muse for help, "I need this word..." almost acting it out with a dancerly choreography to match her impressionistic thesaurus word seeking. "Inscribe," I say after taking her in, and she leaps with a scream and runs off to a tree to complete her writing.

When it is time for us to share our creations in performance, Adel leaps up to share, as though she's pushing back walking against an imaginary blizzard moving through an inner storm. Everything is quiet, even the wind song in the forest canopy and the frog people at the nearby creek.

Adel reads, but really, she finds her truth and speaks it to the witnesses of the New Roots community and the land and her beings. Adel and her truth are being seen and heard deeply and completely. When she has finished, she promptly turns on her heel and runs off screaming into the forest to be alone. I do not try to bring her back. I respect that she knows what she needs on an instinctual level, and I trust her to find her way back to us when she is ready. This is a somatic release, a release of psychological and emotional stress that was like a knot untied allowing her to access the pure personal power and beauty that defines her life force once again.

We were all performing our odes around the fire circle, clapping after each and naming a few appreciations, when Adel's quiet, sure steps carried her now calm and relieved face to meet ours. She slipped into the audience and encouraged others seamlessly, and we turned to her with our appreciations for her courageous self-expression.

The Feeling of Writing

By Adel

When I'm forced I'm broken
The presser within me slowly crushes my confidence and I sit there staring at a
Blank paper.
What will I do what will I do teacher coming expecting more from me.
I can't give more I'm empty
help me
Please help me
I can't do it anymore
I hate it
It infuriates me
As I inscribe painful words in paper
Now you can see writing
How it is in my mind
Breath but I can't
I'm suffocated in the depths of writing
But when I choose
I'm peaceful.

Tainer

He and his best friend have invisible glue between them in thought and play. Ready to tussle lovingly on the ground, inhabit quirky characters and idiosyncratic humor in the blink of an eye, and turn a chilly shouldered side glance at me "the teacher." I observed their extraordinary friendship from a distance for a few weeks, then during morning wood collection and fire building when the cold was starting to bite, I approached them with a third wild-warrior personality far away at the small yurt to steer them back to the group efforts. To do so with authority would have meant instant rejection and disdain. A dash of macabre trickster humor and irreverence in my playful yet firm requests turned their momentum.

Casey was teaching her class on weaving, using a tiny loom; kids were creating either a hand-woven bookmark or a bracelet of which they were very proud. I was at the fire circle with Casey finishing my lunch before heading out at the conclusion of a morning shift. Tainer stationed himself between us with his mini-loom and set fast to work. Somehow, I struck up a conversation, and he shared generously about how annoying and irrelevant his classroom teacher's presentation on a famous artist was. How he is bored in her classes, so he acts out as the class clown. As a licensed art educator who has taught in public schools, I didn't flinch, continued to listen intently without judgment or justification. In the meantime, Tainer's focus and craftsmanship were sharp and precise. I could see him telling this story, his truth, and at the same time taking the story off like a Mr. Rogers jacket, followed by putting on a warm, comfy sweater. The story he told, he let go of as he told it. He became more present in the moment, surrounded by teachers, who are also artists, at the fire circle in the forest. He found a new story in that moment, subtle but a true reclaiming.

The layers of resentment for school and teachers in this eight-year-old student were as thick and a part of his personality as much as are a pair of thick-soled feet familiarly treading the earth and altering physiology to the point of being a callus shoe. In time, Tainer became my most enthusiastic student, sitting close to me in the yurt while in front of everyone teaching about the automaticity of the human heart and general miraculous intelligences of the human central-nervous system. Hey! Our bodies are amazing! Guess who hung on every word, a listening ear ready to fill in the blank pause after questions were posed?

Guess who would come to me, looking up with full-dark eyes of innocent, sweet heartedness in the spaces between words and actions, "I can trust in this

adult, this teacher, and I can crave the kindness and connection so readily given in this authentic exchange?” Though it was a pandemic, and we all minded the physical guidelines and boundaries as best we could, you know when a kid is dying to hug you. Tainer hugged me with everything he had, just standing inches away from me, and he felt me hugging him right back with my presence and attention.

At our New Roots graduation ceremony in June 2021, our whole community standing in a circle connected by a web of yarn and appreciations, I chose to add to the appreciations for Tainer. We had shared a year in the forest among all seasons, and as I spoke, I observed a familiar, slow-motion somatic experience unfold for him. Eyes slowly focused, whole body listening. I watched as the compliments I spoke were received by the body of water of his person and as the stones fell through, they hit the bottom of his river. He felt those compliments find a home in him as true and meaningful and tender.

Meghan Rigali's bio can be found on page 11.

End Note

Let your hearts be mended with the string that runs strong from the earth.
Erase your pain even if it flows deep with the love from others.
Hold strong whether the wind blows hard or soft,
soak in the sunshine and
remember the names of each other.
Look around, these are your people,
they're here today and here tomorrow—
even if they're gone, they will still walk next to you and hold your hand.
Look around and say, “I got you.”

Written by New Roots student Ada Hellier as an offering of love and healing in our grief ceremony for the Texas school shooting and as an expression of the profound depth of experience and connection found in the New Roots community.

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ABOUT THE EDITOR

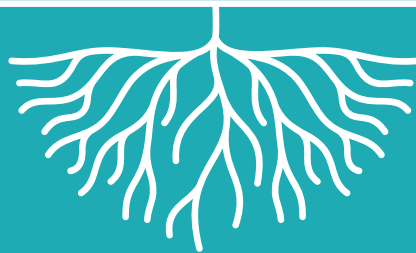
Regan Eberhart works with magazines, book publishers, individuals, and nonprofit organizations to help them tell their stories to diverse audiences. She is a copy editor, ghostwriter, and storyteller, with a specialty in simplifying complex subjects. When her work began to focus on communicating about divisive, triggering topics, she went back to school to study mediation and conflict resolution, hoping to foster more understanding in the world. Other publishing experiences have included serving as photo editor for a national environmental magazine and wordsmithing for Middlebury College in the communications and donor relations offices.



In the end, nature proves the master teacher. Rather than isolate students in rows in rectangular rooms, bring them to a living space that will provide ever-changing context. Gathering in a gazebo at the town green in Bristol, the diverse group awkwardly looked around at one another, and then slowly ideas began bouncing back and forth.

— Matthew Schlein, Founder of the Walden Project and the Willowell Foundation

AS THE COVID PANDEMIC SPREAD ACROSS THE COUNTRY AND SCHOOLS CLOSED IN RESPONSE, an unconventional school for young children was quickly conceived and launched. Its campus was in the woods of Vermont. The teachers had no materials, no curriculum, and about three weeks to prepare. The result was a triumph of ingenuity, imagination, and determination.



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