



Children spend every Wednesday morning in the woods in the Forest Kindergarten program at the Mt. Lebanon Elementary School in West Lebanon. **Opposite:** The Mt. Lebanon Elementary Forest Kindergarten class meets around the fire.



BY Lois Shea

PHOTOS BY Cheryl Senter

Courtesy of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation



# THE WELLBORN

LEARNING “FROM THE GROUND UP”

# ECOLOGY FUND

It's a frigid Wednesday morning, and sounds of joy ring from the woods behind the Mt. Lebanon Elementary School. There's a classroom out there—one that consists of trees and rocks, a fire pit ringed with logs for sitting, and a bucket latrine inside a tent. And lots of snow. A brace of brightly clad kindergarteners slide on their backsides (look, Mom, no sled!) down a snowy chute that looks like it was crafted by a giant otter.

Welcome to Forest Kindergarten. The kids and their teachers are out here every Wednesday—sun, rain, or snow. Only the most extreme weather keeps them inside. This morning, the kids learned about animal camouflage. They have learned about native bird species, animal tracks, and predators. There was the epic day when, walking quietly through the landscape, they came upon a white-tailed deer and froze in little-kid wonder.

# Marguerite Wellborn was a devoted and self-taught naturalist. The outdoors was her playground, her laboratory, and her home.

The concept of a “forest kindergarten” was launched in the Upper Valley with help from the Wellborn Ecology Fund of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation. It has taken hold in 20 schools in New Hampshire and Vermont, gaining national attention along the way.

## MARGUERITE WELLBORN’S LEGACY

Such programs are just one example of the impact of the Wellborn Ecology Fund, which was created by a woman whose charitable legacy has touched hundreds of thousands of people. Thanks in part to Marguerite Wellborn’s bequest, place-based ecology education has been incorporated into the curricula at dozens of schools across the Upper Valley—from kindergarten to high school.

“Kids get out there and learn to love their place and get their fingers dirty . . . and they learn to become good stewards of their place,” says Sheila Moran, a longtime Upper Valley school principal and former Wellborn Ecology Fund advisory committee member.

Since 2001, the Wellborn Ecology Fund has awarded grants totaling more than \$5.5 million to more than 125 organizations and programs in the Upper Valley, and it is positioned to continue in perpetuity.

Students are tracking wildlife, studying vernal pools and stream ecology, learning about carbon sequestration, gathering climate data—and much more. The Wellborn Institute, launched in 2014, provides educators with professional development and resources. Farm-to-school projects are teaching kids about local farms, local food production, and good nutrition.

“The Outside Story,” a weekly essay series (also bound in two compilation volumes), appears in *Northern Woodlands* magazine and in local newspapers, exposing more than 190,000 readers to articles on ecology from the return of the Karner blue butterfly to the science of bird migration, and from the ways raccoons prepare for winter to how snakes use their tongues to help them smell.



Marguerite Wellborn and her husband Ben Wellborn. Photo by Matthew Daniell, courtesy of Sally Wellborn.

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During Forest Kindergarten, kids learn the science and wonder of the natural world.





**Top:** Third and fourth graders at the Maple Avenue Elementary School in Claremont participating in place-based ecology education supported by the Wellborn Ecology Fund. **Above and right:** Kids sketch in their science notebooks during a place-based ecology lesson in Claremont.



“Nature-based education should be a New Hampshire or Vermont child’s birthright,” says David Sobel, a senior education-department faculty member at Antioch University New England and national expert on place-based education. “The Wellborn Fund has helped to normalize the whole notion of place-based education . . . that this is normal and correct and what’s healthy for kids.”

### MAKING A CONCERN A COMMITMENT

Marguerite Wellborn was a devoted and self-taught naturalist. The outdoors was her playground, her laboratory, and her home. She studied ecology her entire life, reading voraciously between forays into the wilderness, and she shared what she learned with her children and grandchildren, taking them on nature walks to identify flora and fauna. She wrote articles about the construction of spiderwebs and the complicated lives of ants, about roses and skunk cabbages and climate change. And she was profoundly concerned about the fate of the environment.

Marguerite lived her last six years in Hanover and developed a strong connection with the Upper Valley landscape. Her daughter, Sally Wellborn of Cornish, remembers her saying, “You have such clean air here!” Not long before she died, she said to Sally, “I can’t believe what’s happening to the world.”

In Marguerite Wellborn’s will were her last 70 words on the subject, calling for the creation of the Wellborn Ecology Fund at the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation “to be used for public awareness of environmental and ecological issues in the Upper Valley . . .” She left nearly \$10 million to help preserve the environment she loved so much by helping people to understand it.

“She noticed that we were using up our beautiful environment, and she was worried,” Sally Wellborn says. “She was so worried that she gave that bequest to everybody.”



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“Understanding and being connected to our places in a visceral way by learning outdoors is critical to community well-being and to the continued stewardship of our spectacular natural resources.”

—Kevin Peterson, New Hampshire Charitable Foundation



The New Hampshire Charitable Foundation put Kevin Peterson, a Dartmouth alum, former Appalachian Trail manager, and current Lyme town moderator, in charge of overseeing the fund. Kevin (who also oversees the foundation’s environmental grant-making portfolio) has made carrying out Marguerite Wellborn’s legacy a central part of his life’s work.

“It’s an honor for the Charitable Foundation to steward Mrs. Wellborn’s legacy,” he says. “Understanding and being connected to our places in a visceral way by learning outdoors is critical to community well-being and to the continued stewardship of our spectacular natural resources.”

**Above:** Students from Maple Avenue Elementary sketch in their notebooks. **Opposite:** A student inspects a white pinecone with a hand lens during place-based science education in Claremont.

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## AHEAD OF THE CURVE

Marguerite's bequest came just ahead of what has become a mounting body of evidence about the value of place-based environmental education and outdoor exploration. The Wellborn Ecology Fund has helped keep the Upper Valley ahead of the curve.

"I think it becomes more relevant every day," Sally Wellborn says. "They're learning from the ground up, so to speak. And this notion of 'place-based education'—the whole fund has taken this to heart and helped connect people with their backyards and with the outdoors."

In Lebanon, the Forest Kindergarteners gather back around their fire. Mittens are laid to dry, little cheeks glow red, eyes are bright. (Their feet are warm and dry—a grant from the Wellborn Fund bought all of their boots from the local feed store, plus other outdoor gear.)

When they go inside, they will write

and draw about their experiences in the woods. Their teacher, Christina Joanis, says that when they write and draw after being outdoors, they do so with unrestrained enthusiasm. They are motivated to spell new words, to find new and vivid ways to express themselves.

Christina says some of the kids were struggling with full-day kindergarten. But at a recent parent-teacher night, parents of the Forest Kindergarteners affirmed that the program was helping turn that around. "Every parent said 'My kid loves to go to school.'"

Around the fire, the children share their thoughts. One says, "I liked playing camouflage." Another comments, "I liked when I helped with the fire, getting some sticks." And a third offers, "I liked when I was going sliding!"

They sing a song as they get ready to head inside. It ends like this:

"We like the forest, we like the forest, bye, bye, bye." ←



### ONLINE EXTRA

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