



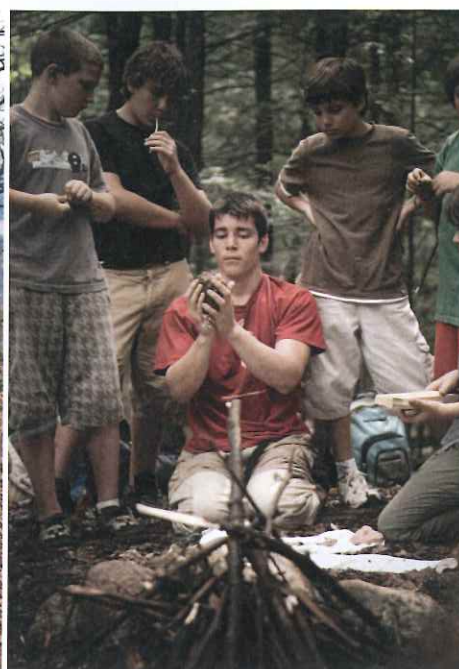
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SUSTAINING ROOTS LOCALLY



Wild Earth Program

BY MARY PEARSON, *Recreation Coordinator at Astor Services for Children & Families*

PAST THE GATE, OVER the stream and up a winding trail, you'll find a clearing for Wild Earth at Astor Services for Children & Families in Rhinebeck. It's also where, if you listen past the wind in the leaves and the rustle of animals scurrying through the underbrush, you'll hear the sounds of children laughing. Wild Earth is more than just an outdoor education experience; it's an opportunity for learning, exploring and healing. It's where children are on an adventure to grow physically, socially and emotionally.

Located in New Paltz, Wild Earth is a nonprofit that works with local communities to bring people outdoors. To that end, Astor was originally approached by Wild Earth's CEO, David Brownstein, in the winter of 2015/2016 with the idea that our organizations partner up to create a unique, outdoor developmentally beneficial opportunity for children living in our residential programs.

Beginning in the spring, the recreation department at Astor and the Wild Earth team collaborated to create the initial pilot program, which included four weekly sessions that lasted about two hours each. It was decided that at the start of each session, 10 to 20 children between the ages of nine and 14 would hike to Wild Earth's Astor home—a circular clearing under a canopied ridgeline. From there, the children would participate in learning new skills, cofacilitated by Wild Earth instructors and Astor staff.

The pilot program was put in place in the spring and included activities that ranged from constructing weather-proof lean-tos to weaving dream catchers out of natural materials. The children were encouraged to stretch past their comfort zones, explore the wilderness around them and ask as many questions

as they wanted to gain understanding of both of the world around them and their inner selves.

At the end of each Wild Earth session, the children and staff came together under the trees to sing one final song. As a group, they discussed what they had learned and made connections about how the experiences they had during Wild Earth could be translated into their everyday lives.

When asked what their favorite part of Wild Earth at Astor was, the children's answers were as varied as the activities offered. One child said it was cool that "they taught us how to build our own shelter." Another child's favorite activities were the "skulls, sculpture, animal stuff and building the forts."

Both the children and staff discussed how rewarding the experience had been for them. One of the younger children said that at the beginning of the Wild Earth program, he was nervous and scared. But by the end of it, he described himself as being very happy. The staff stated how comfortable the experience was for them, and everyone appreciated the kind and genuine spirits of the Wild Earth facilitators.

Following the wonderful success of our pilot program with Wild Earth, phase two of the project is scheduled to begin this fall. It's sure to be an exciting two weeks, with an emphasis on reaching more children through diversified programming, including Nature Open Houses, Camp Wild Earth, and off-grounds field trips to the Wild Earth campus. Our staff will also benefit through increased development opportunities. We can hardly wait.

For more information about Astor Services for Children & Families and Wild Earth, visit www.astorservices.org and www.wildearth.org. ■