

Concord Nonprofit Offers Therapy Through Nature

Published in *The Boston Globe*



MICHAEL DESMOND COX

Sophie Wadsworth, executive director of the Nature Connection, with Watertown Boys & Girls Club member Lara Chiste.

By Cindy Cantrell GLOBE CORRESPONDENT, APRIL 28, 2017

Founded in 1983, the Nature Connection is a Concord-based nonprofit organization that delivers educational and therapeutic nature programs to individuals with limited or no access to the outdoors at residential schools, special needs facilities, nursing homes, at-risk youth programs, and Alzheimer's care programs.

Executive director Sophie Wadsworth, a Stow resident who began volunteering with the organization two years before joining the staff in 2006, had this to say:

Q. What is a typical program?

A. When we visit client sites, we don't stand up and give a talk. We have a 4 to 1 ratio, thanks to an extraordinary team of trained volunteers, so we're able to offer one-on-one attention during hands-on activities. We bring a mix of fresh nature materials based on the season — everything from flowers to moss, shells, fall vegetables, and leaves of all kinds — as well as rabbits, hedgehogs, chinchillas, guinea pigs, cats, dogs, and other animals that participants can learn about, touch, and hold. It's really a feast for the senses.

Q. What are the benefits of nature-assisted therapy?

A. Nature and animals bring joy and an experience of being in the present moment. It's a true therapeutic intervention. The benefits we see include increased engagement, empowerment and enhanced self-confidence, diminished feelings of isolation

across the age spectrum, strengthened bonds with peers and caregivers, and a general sense of well-being.

Q. How is the Nature Connection funded?

A. Our partner sites pay a modest fee for service, but we have to fund-raise to cover the actual cost of training volunteers to orchestrate a live animal program. This enables us to serve a wide range of program sites, which we're actively growing thanks to donors, board members, volunteers, and advisers who share their professional talents pro bono.

Q. Is the organization facing any challenges?

A. People are very aware of the benefits of nature's healing power, but we must continue to attract funding to keep pace with growing need — particularly the expanding population of elders with memory loss. Nature can be that bridge to the outside world, bringing sounds and smells into the four walls of their facility. That need will continue to grow, and we aim to meet it as energetically as possible.

The Nature Connection's next free training for family caregivers of loved ones with memory loss will take place Tuesday, May 2, 9:15 to 11:30 a.m., at the Lexington Community Center. To register and for more information, visit nature-connection.org.

Cindy Cantrell can be reached at cindycantrell20@gmail.com.