

Muir Woods Mentors and the Boys & Girls Club

Abstract

This project is designed to establish a lasting connection between students in the Muir Woods Mentors club (MWM) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the children in the Boys and Girls Club of Madison (B&GC), through environmental projects. The project intends to encourage kids in the B&GC to experience and enjoy nature, learn about environmental issues through inquiry-based learning and introduce them to a world-class university.

The MWM and the B&GC members will be improving water quality by planting native vegetation and removing trash from areas of the Lakeshore Nature Preserve (LNP), a natural area on the UW campus, the B&GC local park, Penn Park. The children and MWM will mainly be working in Penn Park, but will also take several field trips to the LNP, to enjoy the areas and to plant. The children will document their observations in written and photographic forms as well as a brochure to share with parents.

I have contacted both the B&GC and the Lakeshore Nature Preserve, as well as the MWM faculty advisor Margaret Nellis, and have received strong enthusiasm and support from all of them for this project. This project will introduce the children of the B&GC to the University and will allow close connections to be built between the mentors and the children of the B&GC. As president of MWM, I will work with, and direct, the other mentors in empowering kids to have fun exploring and working in their park, as well as in the Lakeshore Nature Preserve, thus helping me to develop my own ability to lead. The MWM members will develop leadership skills through collaborative command. The University of Wisconsin will also benefit from this project by the improvement of Lakeshore Preserve and the exposure of a new generation of students and leaders to the UW campus.

Purpose

The purpose of this project is to establish a lasting connection between students at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the children in the Boys and Girls Club of Madison (B&GC) through environmental projects. The project intends to encourage kids in the B&GC to experience and enjoy nature, develop the leadership skills of the members of MWM and allow both the MWM and the kids of the B&GC to learn about and improving water quality.

Personal interest and background

As a junior at the UW-Madison, I have come to know the campus quite well, and one of the most important things for me has been familiarizing myself with the natural areas in and around campus. I have always found solace in nature. Whenever I feel stressed or unhappy taking a run through the Arboretum or a walk along Lakeshore Nature Preserve always makes me feel calm and restored, ready to face my problems and accomplish whatever is necessary. Nature is a crucial part of my ability to feel connected, happy, and a part of my community.

The honors classes I have taken at UW have been wonderful ways to increase my knowledge on subjects that I am passionate about, such as nature. Taking Biocore my junior and sophomore years is one example of a great experience I have had. As part of the lab component of the course, I was able to learn about the Biocore prairie in Lakeshore Nature Preserve, its ecology and many of the species that grow there. My favorite class, however, has been the course I am taking as a greensheet honors course on Environmental Health. In this class I have been exposed to how pervasive the problem of water pollution can be, some sources of pollution, and some options we have to fight it.

I knew that I wanted to share my enjoyment of the environment with others, especially those who may not have already realized the therapeutic power that being in a natural area can have. When I arrived on campus as a freshman I was enthusiastic to join the student organization Muir Woods Mentors (MWM). The purpose of MWM is to expose underprivileged children to the benefits of nature and to teach the children about ecological issues and encourage them to think of, and implement, solutions. MWM was established by the first Leadership Trust Award, given to Beth Rollmann for the 2003-2004 academic year. Beth began MWM as a club to build connections between children from low socioeconomic households and university students to share a love of nature and provide educational and beneficial interactions for everyone involved. The founder, Beth, told me that "Honestly, Muir Woods Mentors has probably been one of the most fulfilling things I have done in my life. It ranks right up there with getting married, becoming a physician, and most recently, becoming a mother".

I first learned about the club from my sisters, both of whom were students at UW and presidents of MWM. Talking with them, I learned about MWM's mission and how useful the club can be in getting kids engaged with nature. Working with kids has been a rewarding constant in my life. I began volunteering as an afterschool elementary tutor in high school. I continued to volunteer as a tutor when coming to the UW, both my freshman and sophomore years, until I began to take on more leadership in MWM. I have always found working with kids to be incredibly gratifying; their energetic, fresh perspective on life always helps me see things with new enthusiasm. MWM has been such a great experience for me, because I am able to combine my love of nature and working with kids in such a way as to allow both the mentors and the kids to engage, explore, and enjoy nature.

As first a member, then president of MWM I have had the opportunity to experience various styles of leadership. To me, organizations are the most successful when members do not feel themselves under a controlling dictatorship. The project I am developing with the B&GC in Muir Woods would allow me to develop and improve my role as a leader of the MWM. I have found that the most enjoyable, and effective in the long-term, is shared or collaborative leadership. Each member is given a role and opportunity to lead an activity or set of activities, giving them increased involvement in and attachment to MWM. I want to work to empower individuals within MWM to collectively lead the group. This will hopefully allow MWM to continue and succeed past my, or any one specific student's, tenure as president. Improving my leadership role will also be helpful to me as I develop my abilities as a facilitator of collaborative learning and other ways of involvement.

I believe that MWM is an organization that serves a unique, vital role to the UW students and the children with whom they interact. The mission of MWM is just as relevant today as when the club

was founded; however, the direction of the club should shift somewhat, to focus on developing sustainable relationships between underprivileged children, their communities, and nature. I would like the club to allow the kids to enjoy and form their own connections with nature, to empower the kids to feel comfortable seeking out and being in nature on their own – eventually without needing Muir Woods Mentors to facilitate their experience.

Evidence of community support

I met with the Field Manager and Outreach Coordinator of Lakeshore Nature Preserve. My meeting with these two women was incredibly helpful; I was able to reconnect the idea of MWM with the Muir Woods preserve. The Lakeshore Nature Preserve staff was very enthusiastic with the idea of MWM working with kids in Muir Woods again. We discussed various options for projects that MWM and the children could work on in Muir Woods that could also be applied to the kids' local park. The idea that seemed to fit perfectly with Muir Woods' needs as well as what the kids would find interesting and fulfilling was working on improving water quality.

Contacting the director of Family Voices, a program of the Madison Boys and Girls Club (B&GC), was also very useful. Family Voices was created over ten years ago by the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies in the School of Human Ecology at the UW to address the concerns of African American Families. The program currently operates a Mentor/Tutoring program at the Taft Street B&GC site with an emphasis on parent engagement. Working with this program would allow MWM to establish a meaningful, long-lasting connection with a very important community partner – B&GC. The director expressed a great deal of interest in working with MWM to provide enrichment opportunities for children in the afterschool and weekend programs. These programs are ideal for MWM involvement for multiple reasons. First, the desires of MWM and the needs of the program dovetail perfectly; with funding, MWM could provide children who have never explored nature the opportunity to access Madison's natural areas both in their backyard and at the UW campus. We can expose the kids to the university and the opportunities that may be found there. A second reason why involvement with this program will be ideal is that it provides the opportunity to reach the entire community. Weekly family dinner nights at which the kids present on various activities could serve as an outreach vehicle allowing parents to hear about the natural areas. This could lead to the children showing their families their local park, Penn Park, and their knowledge about it.

Description of project and how it will be conducted

The knowledge I have gained from my Environmental Health course, my love for and experience with nature – especially along the lake – and my meetings with the Field Manager and Outreach Coordinator of Lakeshore Nature Preserve and Director of Family Voices crystalized into the perfect project for MWM to undertake with the youth of the Boys & Girls Club. The critical issue of water pollution is something that affects everyone, and water quality can be improved by many activities.

MWM will work with youth from the B&GC and staff from the Lakeshore Nature Preserve to help educate the kids about water quality issues and what we can do to improve our water. One example of the projects that they will undertake in Muir Woods is the replanting of native plants on banks along the lake. These banks are bare from previous invasive species removal, and are now susceptible to erosion which would decrease water quality. Replanting to control erosion would be easily applicable to Penn Park, as would picking up litter to decrease water pollution and improve water quality.

Methods of implementation

The methods of implementation can be begun with several, accomplishable steps. Contacting the director of Family Voices, the program MWM will work with, is the first step – already accomplished. Reestablishing a connection with the Lakeshore Nature Preserve is the second step also already accomplished. The officers of MWM will work in Muir Woods this spring semester to acquaint themselves with Muir Woods and the potential areas where we can work with the kids.

The next step is to have planning meetings with the leadership of the B&GC to create a Memorandum of Understanding that outlines all the details of the partnership, including who does what, the schedule, etc. After scheduling and transportation has been determined, the MWM will be set until the fall semester when the program will begin.

We will do activities with the B&GC once a week. At first most of our time will be spent around the B&GC and Penn Park. After getting to know the kids and exploring Penn Park with them, we will take our first of eight field trips to learn about the Lakeshore Nature Preserve and work to improve it. We will work with the kids to help them learn about water pollution and water quality issues. The kids will also be encouraged to explore their natural areas and discover new questions, and solutions to the various challenges found when working in nature.

Methods of evaluation

In order to measure and document the success of the MWM, we will be having the kids keep journals where they will write something they discovered, thought about, or wondered while working in either Penn Park or Muir Woods each week. The MWM university students will help the children with writing in their journals and thinking of observations and questions and ways to answer those questions. These journals will be written in at least once a week, with the MWM. But hopefully, by empowering the children to explore their local natural areas, and teaching them to record observations and questions and think of methods to begin answering those questions, the kids will begin writing in their journals after exploring independently, with their own questions. Students will also photograph both parks throughout the work process. These photographs will help document the improvement project and allow the kids to practice creativity and diligence in documentation.

The kids will also have a final project of creating a guide or brochure to Penn Park. This brochure will allow them to show off their exploratory discoveries of Penn Park and the photographs they have been taking throughout the year to their parents and community.

Timeline

Fall 2017 – Early Winter

MWM members work in Muir Woods to become acquainted with the area

Have initial meetings at B&GC to get to know the kids and Penn Park

Take three field trips to Muir Woods with the kids, begin the project of replanting

Winter

Work on Penn Park when possible

Work with the kids in inquiry-based nature learning

Help kids with brochures and journals

Spring

Take five more field trips to Muir Woods with the kids, helping to improve water quality by picking up litter, replanting native plants along banks of water sources, and potentially other activities

Help finalize the brochures, encourage the kids to share with the community

Promote local natural areas, such as Penn Park

Benefits

The continuation of Muir Woods Mentors would benefit all involved through a sharing of knowledge, building of connections, and empowerment to experience and improve nature. The university students- MWM, I, our advisor Margaret Nellis, the children, their community, the Lakeshore Nature Preserve staff, and the natural areas will all benefit.

The students of MWM will gain leadership experience as well as build new, meaningful relationships with the children of the B&GC. This experience interacting with kids to inspire and empower them will be useful to the mentors, not just in their time with MWM but throughout their life as they continue on and begin to plan and coordinate programs for their jobs and other involvements in their lives.

I will gain leadership experience as well. This will be a great opportunity for me to learn how to encourage cooperative leadership for the mentors, building the club up to be stronger because of the capability of all of the members. I will also improve my communication, coordination, and outreach skills by working beyond the campus network, with the various programs at B&GC and the Lakeshore Nature Preserve. Learning how to communicate the benefits of MWM and coordinating the schedules of all the various people involved will be an excellent way for me to improve my ability to lead and work with groups of people. I will also benefit greatly from continuing to work with, and be inspired by, the children of the B&GC. I will be able to teach children about some environmental issues, and learn from them about some daily issues of their lives and hopefully be able to help them with implementing solutions for both the environmental and everyday issues. The opportunity to share with the kids the benefits of nature is such a valuable one to me!

Margaret Nellis, our faculty advisor, will benefit from her involvement with this project because it will strengthen her connections with various outreach programs throughout the community. This award will help to institutionalize some of her existing connections, such as with the programs at the B&GC, and renew other partnerships such as with the staff at the Lakeshore Nature Preserve. Margaret works to develop interdisciplinary models to improve community development and this project will enable her to gain new knowledge about how to address environmental issues. Margaret will also gain more experience and new knowledge on innovative approaches to promoting UW student health and well-being through civic engagement in the community.

The children and their community will benefit greatly from this project as well. The kids will learn more about their local natural areas and the issues of water pollution, as well as learning about campus natural areas and water pollution issues found in campus. The kids will be encouraged to use inquiry-based learning as they work in the natural areas, hopefully making them inspired, independent learners. The children will also be writing in weekly journals about their experiences with MWM, not only documenting the successes and problems of the project but also improving the reading and writing skills of the children. The youth will gain experience with technology by working with digital cameras to document the project, providing the beginning of the necessary, valuable technological skills. The kids will also benefit from the empowerment that MWM will provide, enabling the kids to seek out and enjoy nature for the rest of their lives. The kids will be able to become active participants in the environment, encouraging more of a connection, allowing the kids to feel more ownership and pride in their natural areas. By providing a positive, inspirational, educational experience on the UW campus the MWM will send a positive message to the children of the B&GC that they can succeed beyond their home community and belong in a university atmosphere.

This project will benefit the entire community by providing an opportunity for the parents of the children to share their kids' enthusiasm and experience the nature that their kids have worked in and improved. The MWM will share with the ethnically diverse kids of the B&GC the mentors' knowledge and passion for the environment, providing a bridge for the kids to connect with their community and share the kids' newfound appreciation for their local park.

The Lakeshore Nature Preserve staff and the natural areas of Penn Park and Muir Woods will all benefit from this project. The MWM will bring enthusiasm and volunteer power to the staff of the Lakeshore Nature Preserve. MWM will be helping to improve both Muir Woods and Penn Park with the kids. Our work in both natural areas will be very beneficial to the water quality of these places. Working in both Penn Park and Muir Woods will allow MWM to advocate Madison's natural areas to others, increase public knowledge about and hopefully desire to see these areas.

Budget

Description	Estimated Cost
Transportation: gas for the B&GC vans, driving fee (\$50 for each field trip)	\$400
Journals, pens, pencils, markers, supplies for the brochures	\$150
Exploratory learning materials: mini-magnifying lenses, insect traps etc.	\$200
Digital cameras	\$200
Native plants to replant areas susceptible to erosion and other planting supplies: shovels, glove, etc.	\$750
Snacks during field activities	\$300
Total	\$2000

Required Leadership Trust Award Essay

The most important leadership opportunity I have undertaken is the presidency of the student organization Muir Woods Mentors (MWM). MWM is a student organization that was founded in 2003 at the University of Wisconsin-Madison when Beth Rollmann won the first Leadership Trust Award. Beth began MWM as a club to build connections between children from underprivileged households and university students to share a love of nature and provide educational and beneficial interactions for everyone involved. Beth said that "honestly, Muir Woods Mentors has probably been one of the most fulfilling things I have done in my life. It ranks right up there with getting married, becoming a physician, and most recently, becoming a mother".

As first a member and then the president of MWM, I saw how the club has progressed since its founding by Beth. Though the club has continued its dedication to engaging underprivileged children with the environment, as time has progressed MWM has struggled to keep its connection to a specific group in the community and therefore to foster long-term, sustainable connections between children and the environment. Taking over as the leader of the club has been the biggest challenge and opportunity I have faced. I believe that MWM is an organization that serves a unique, vital role to the

UW students and the children with whom they interact. However, revitalizing the club to allow MWM to achieve its mission and take advantage of the many opportunities that are in the Madison community has been an intimidating task to accomplish.

I have had the opportunity to experience various styles of leadership. The most successful style of leadership, to me, is when members do not feel themselves under a controlling dictatorship. I have found that the most enjoyable, and effective in the long-term, is shared or collaborative leadership. The method of leading that I am trying to achieve is one in which each member is given a role and opportunity to lead an activity or set of activities. This will hopefully result in the members having an increased involvement in and attachment to MWM, allowing MWM to continue and succeed past my, or any one specific student's, tenure as president.

My experience as president of MWM has shaped my time as an undergraduate and my approach to my future career- medicine, by making me much more collaborative. This emphasis on collaboration has allowed me to gain new connections and build better relationships. Learning how to better work with, and direct, others will be crucial to my success as a doctor. As president of MWM I hope to revitalize the club, giving it a lasting connection and impact with its community partners. At the same time, I will become a better leader. By working with our community partners, I will improve my organizational skills and abilities to compromise; both of which will be valuable as I pursue a career in medicine. I hope to succeed in my leadership of MWM and become the kind of inspired leader that Beth was.