No Child Left Inside

There's a Nature Valley granola bar video circulating where an interviewer asks three generations of four families what they did (or do) for fun as a kid. The grandparents discuss berry picking and escaping from near-bear attacks. The parents also describe creative outdoor play. The kids' responses are alarming. "Fun" makes them think of their tablets and video games.

It's heartbreaking on many levels. For one, millennials are living excessively digital lives, spending less time with peers and more time expressing themselves with their fingertips. (I have a theory about why so many young people I know are postponing their drivers' licenses. They don't need to get out of the house to socialize!) According to the Nature Conservancy, 88% of kids spend time online every day, while only 66% of kids have had a meaningful experience in nature.

Far too many of today's kids aren't playing outside. When I was ten, my neighborhood was composed of entire families of "free-range children." We'd set up camp by the creek, pick berries, collect rocks, and study bugs. Today, for valid safety reasons, parents are discouraged from allowing their kids to explore the outdoors unattended. I doubt many of them would be interested in doing so, anyway.

The most detrimental loss belongs to our environment. Because so many kids aren't spending time getting to know the plants, trees, animals, and water that make up planet Earth, one out of every three young people doesn't feel obligated to combat the damage our world has suffered at our hands. (Again, according to the Nature Conservancy.) How will the next generation continue to sustain life on earth, if they don't care about the ecosystem or don't know how to help it heal?

In response to all these issues and more, the state of Maryland has developed and implemented a series of environmental literacy standards for teachers to use in their classrooms in the hopes that students will be both inspired and armed with the knowledge it will take to save Mother Earth.

But, what am I to do? I'm but a lowly art teacher?

“Nonsense,” says Notre Dame Maryland University professor and STEM coordinator, Dr. Juliann DuPuis. After moving here from New Hampshire, she established a Summer STEM Institute for teachers at the University.

Through day-long programs such as Project WET (about oceans and other bodies of water), Project WOW! (Wonders of Wetlands), NOAA’s Globe Project, Project Learning Tree (I think you can guess what this is about), and Project WILD (about wildlife), Dr. DuPuis and guest environmental educators modeled dozens of ways that the twenty teachers in my class can incorporate environmental science into our wide range of grade levels, curriculum, and school environments.

I sat next to Donna Jones, an inquisitive algebra teacher at Woodlawn High School. Even though our jobs couldn’t be more different, we each managed to find ways to incorporate the activities our instructors demonstrated into our classrooms. The games we played were both fun and educational, and we got to spend plenty of time on the gorgeous grounds of NDMU.

The final component to the class was our “No Child Left Inside” research project. I chose to focus on the Anna C. Leight Estuary Center at Otter Point, which is a ten minute drive from our school. There, we will contribute to clean-up and wetlands restoration projects while practicing wetland photography. The class will write and illustrate a book about our experience, including facts about wetlands and our best photographs from our field trips.

I’ve also decided to establish a “We Love our eARTh” theme for the school year in my art and library classes (yes, I’ve taken on a new role!). Stay tuned for the results of my students environmental art projects, more than a few of which will come from the guides and exercises I gained during my week at the NDMU Summer STEM Institute!

Model of the water cycle my group made for Project WET.

We went with an “Itsy, Bitsy Spider” theme.

My group, Donna, Alex, and Noelle, building a boat with sticks and yarn for Project WOW!

Our boat had to be float and hold a tennis ball without allowing it to get wet in the small pan.

We did it!

My second team gathers data, including GPS coordinates, for our GLOBE location.

My team surveys our location.

Donna examines a “tree cookie” during Project Learning Tree.

Pretending to be “hungry” trees during Project Learning Tree.

Alex and Noelle examine a black bear’s fur during Project WILD.