

Westcave Outdoor Discovery Center Challenges Nature Deficit Disorder
Nonprofit Group Announces 2016 Celebration of Children in Nature Winners

May 6, 2016 – AUSTIN, Texas – The term “nature deficit disorder” refers to the fact that kids today are spending too many hours in front of multimedia screens, and too little time outside enjoying and learning from the natural world. Westcave Outdoor Discovery Center is working to change that, and will be honoring individuals and organizations doing this important work. On September 16th at the Four Seasons Hotel, Westcave will host its 9th Annual Celebration of Children in Nature. These award recipients represent the most innovative and successful initiatives to get kids in Central Texas out into nature more often.

Award Recipients:

John Covert Watson Award for Vision – The Meadows Center for Water and the Environment

Since 2002, The Meadows Center has worked to inspire the next generation of environmental advocates through research, education, service and stewardship. The Meadows Center’s headquarters are located on the site of an environmentally, culturally, and archaeologically significant resource, Spring Lake, which serves as a living laboratory, a community center, and an irreplaceable educational resource. In this inspiring setting, they engage more than 125,000 people each year in environmental education and outdoor learning activities at Spring Lake. They create customizable field trips from pre – kindergarten to high school, with more than 30 TEKS-aligned curricula, that allows educators to design an interactive experience with conservation at its core. Last year, over 31,000 school children learned about the importance of the environment to all living things through hands-on, science learning at Spring Lake. Our site includes a wide variety of educational activities that emphasize the importance of environmental conservation. Among these are demonstration xeriscape gardens, nature walks, the Discovery Hall Aquaria, the Wetlands Boardwalk, interpretive exhibits, paddling tours and glass-bottom boat tours.

John F. Ahrns Award for Environmental Education – Collins Van Nort, founder of Earth Kids at Barton Hills Elementary

Every Friday, for 18 years, Collins has conducted his sixth grade class on the Greenbelt. Collins’ students engage in a variety of activities: journaling using "Sand County Almanac" by Aldus Leopold as a mentor text, pulling invasive species testing for stream velocity, studying creek cross-sections, geocaching, writing poetry, estimating hiking distances, and conducting water quality tests. Extensions of these activities include field trips to Wild Basin Preserve (where Collins is an avid volunteer), Barton Creek Preserve, and Bamberger Ranch. Some of these activities were created as far back as the 1980s when Collins served as the "Science Teacher Specialist" and taught Earth Science and Environmental Science at the Kealing Jr. High Magnet Program. Other activities have evolved over the years. Collins was one of the first members of Colorado River Watch and was the director of the defunct Discovery Camps run by our city’s fledgling science museum, Discovery Hall. Collins is also the founder of an after school program called “Earth Kids.” During this after school program, students engage in similar activities that are nothing short of what his 6th grade class experiences along the Greenbelt. When not hiking, Earth Kids extend their understanding of the natural world with arts and crafts, as well as simple experiments and games. In his 35 years as an educator, Collins has introduced thousands of students to the wonders of outdoor education.

Westcave Award for Enduring Dedication – Phyllis Schunck

Phyllis has shown amazing long-term dedication to the "Casis Forest" and getting kids outdoors in nature, where they benefit from unstructured play. Phyllis has been involved with the Casis Elementary School Forest for many decades: first as a parent, then as a grandparent, and for the past five years as the volunteer Land Steward and “fairy godmother” of the Forest. If you ask almost any student at Casis Elementary what they love best about their school, most will answer “The Forest!” The Forest is three acres of undeveloped land owned by AISD and attached to the Casis Elementary School grounds. Phyllis started managing the land during a critical time when trees and vegetation were dying from erosion and drought conditions. She worked with teachers to recruit students as stewards of their beloved forest, and raised money for improvements.

Over the past five years, an estimated 1,200 kids have had sustained access to this incredible outdoor learning laboratory. Phyllis is a wealth of enthusiasm, knowledge and humor, and serves as a positive role model for the children who always love being in and helping their forest.

E. Lee Walker Award for Collaboration – Marya Fowler, National Wildlife Federation and Anne Muller, Austin ISD – Discovery Hill

A robust partnership between NWF and Austin ISD set the stage for transforming the idea of a demonstration schoolyard habitat into the vibrant outdoor learning center that is Discovery Hill. The seed for this project was planted with a 2010 grant that the National Wildlife Federation received from the Toyota USA Foundation. Marya developed the initial vision for the project with a class of graduate students from Texas A&M Landscape Architecture school. Marya raised over \$50,000 through grants from individuals and corporate sponsors, partnered with more than 10 organizations, and recruited, managed and inspired over 75 volunteers for more than 500 hours to build the garden. The commitment between AISD and NWF provided the opportunity to employ an Outdoor Learning Specialist, Anne Muller, who offers professional development to AISD Science Teachers. Anne coordinates and conducts field trips for schools on the site and regularly explores nature with and teaches students from the neighboring Pleasant Hill Elementary School. Anne also manages the maintenance and care of the site and helps to bring partnering organizations in to the site for their trainings. Since the ribbon cutting ceremony in 2013, over 6,000 students have visited Discovery Hill from the nearby Pleasant Hill Elementary and campuses all over the District. Discovery Hill has also been used to train over 500 teachers on the implementation of schoolyard habitats on their own campuses and on the use of outdoor spaces in the curriculum. The National Wildlife Federation's Schoolyard Habitat project, in partnership with the Austin Independent School District, is a proof of concept that demonstrates that outdoor learning can be successfully institutionalized within a major urban school district. The Discovery Hill Outdoor Learning Center and the children who are outdoors learning in it and thriving in it each day are a living testament to that success.

Awards Ceremony

Westcave Outdoor Discovery Center will shine the spotlight on these recipients at The 9th Annual Celebration of Children in Nature on Friday, September 16th at the Four Seasons Hotel. Carter Smith, Executive Director of Texas Parks & Wildlife Department will be the Master of Ceremonies for the event. Proceeds from the event will help fund the Children in Nature Collaborative of Austin (CiNCA), a core program of Westcave Outdoor Discovery Center.

About the Children in Nature Collaborative of Austin (CiNCA)

A regional partnership among area nonprofits, environmental educators, health professionals, and a broad base of community leaders, CiNCA is dedicated to nurturing a love of nature among children right here in Central Texas. Our programs and support for new green spaces greatly increase opportunities for kids to play and learn in nature. The benefits of doing so go far beyond developing future ambassadors for natural conservation. Research shows that children who spend time outside in nature are healthier, happier, and perform better academically. As CiNCA members, we believe in the power of nature to improve quality of life for kids that explore and feel confident in the natural environment.

About Westcave Outdoor Discovery Center

Founded in 1976 as Westcave Preserve, the mission of Westcave Outdoor Discovery Center is to inspire people to develop a lifelong practice of enjoying and protecting nature. We accomplish this through educational programs, collaborative alliances, and conservation of our beautiful 75-acre preserve. Our preserve in southwest Travis County serves as an outdoor classroom for visitors to explore, discover and appreciate our extraordinary natural surroundings.

Media Contact:

Addie Broussard
Coordinator – Children in Nature Collaborative of Austin
addie@westcave.org
603 W. 13th Street, Suite 2D
Austin, TX 78701
512-276-2257 ext. 100

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