A young boy with short brown hair, wearing a striped t-shirt, is looking through a pair of binoculars. He is standing in a field of tall green grass. The background is a soft-focus green field under bright sunlight. The title 'Discovering the Nature Explorium' is overlaid in large white text at the top.

Discovering the Nature Explorium

by Tracy Delgado-LaStella and Sandra Feinberg

Learning in the out-of-doors
as part of a library visit

Libraries, which are always searching for new ways to connect with their communities, have offered reading gardens and outdoor storytelling to foster a connection with nature and the environment. Today, via a library's outdoor learning space, librarians are participating in the growing movement to connect children with the environment.

The Nature Explorium at the Middle Country Public Library (MCPL) in Centereach, New York, is just such a space.

There's a growing awareness that children need access to public places and outdoor learning opportunities that enhance their health and well-being, provide educationally appropriate formal and informal play activities, promote a direct experience with nature, and foster a sense of community and responsibility for the environment. Exposure to natural environments through play leads to exploration and discovery, engaging a child's physical and mental abilities in a holistic approach to learning and literacy. The hope is that linking early education and nature literacy will lead to an understanding of and appreciation for the natural world.

A visual, hands-on, multisensory approach to literacy reaches an audience of diverse learners. A recent article in *Museum* notes that "most students ... are visual learners who learn best by seeing ... The rest are tactile or kinesthetic learners, and they're the ones who start smiling in a discovery room. They learn best by touching, feeling, and experiencing." Learning in the out-of-doors provides an opportunity for children to learn and reinforce valuable life experiences, including the development of observation, visual, spatial, and social skills.

But access and informal learning are not enough. Based on research conducted by the Dimensions Educational Research Foundation (Dimensions), the value of comprehensive nature education for young children goes beyond simply having well-designed outdoor spaces. Children benefit most in programs that have educators (including librarians) who are knowledgeable about how to use these types of spaces as an integral part of daily learning.

A breath of fresh air

Public libraries as local community institutions can bring together early learning, family-centered practice, nature literacy, and sustainable communities and, at the same time, stay true to their mission of sharing local resources for the common good. For the past half-century, librarians have consciously expanded their community role and increased services for children and teens, including the creation of specially designed spaces that are developmentally and educationally appropriate. A children's outdoor learning environment that is contiguous with the library becomes another learning space that takes advantage of the library's public accessibility, trained public service staff, and inclusive approach to serving the recreational and educational needs of *all* families.

Exposure to natural environments through play leads to discovery and engages children in a holistic approach to learning and literacy.

In 2007, MCPL staff became involved with the Long Island Nature Collaborative for Kids (LINCK)—a group of early childhood, museum, and library professionals who actively promote the development of parks, outdoor classrooms, and community places for nature education. To introduce the concept to Long Island, LINCK invited Dimensions to conduct an introductory seminar on creating outdoor classrooms for children under its Nature Explore project. During this session, the idea was born that libraries—like childcare centers, youth centers, churches, and schools—could provide a community place for outdoor classrooms.

In March 2008, Dimensions conducted a two-day hands-on workshop at the library for landscape professionals, architects, LINCK members, and library staff.

Participants became knowledgeable about the field-tested guiding principles and recommended areas of exploration within a nature classroom. They created idea boards and plans, which resulted in the initial concept design for the Nature Explorium. Shortly after, the library convened a design team, including a landscape architect from the U.S. Forest Service, that completed the schematic plan and formed an advisory committee

that helped with program development. On June 23, 2010, the Nature Explorium officially opened to the public.

Creating the learning space

The library was fortunate to have a fenced-in 5,000-square-foot area adjacent to the children's room, which was used sporadically for programming. This available space set the parameters for the Explorium. It was decided early on that the library would adopt the Dimensions-recommended learning areas, including a climbing/crawling area, messy materials area, building area, nature art area, music and performance area, planting area, gathering/conversation place, reading area, and water feature. Transitioning visitors from the library into the Explorium required creating a welcoming entry as well.

For the Explorium, the library also had to consider naming and identification, visibility, variety, durability, visual appeal, and the regional significance of construction materials and programmatic elements. To make the Explorium mesh with the library setting, staff identified certain features that could be localized and were "institutionally significant." Climb It, Dig It, Plant It, Read It, Create It, Play It, and Splash It became the Explorium area identifiers. Instead of a traditional brick path (listing donor names), our Book Path allows

donors to select their favorite children's book or quote. The Friends Bench (sponsored by our Friends group) displays native Long Island animals. READ plaques, hung creatively around the space, display donors' favorite quotes about Reading, Environment, Adventure, and Discovery. Donors' names are permanently exhibited in the entryway.

Programs and staffing

Staff immersed themselves in the underlying principles and practices of nature literacy and focused on age-appropriate activities in the Explorium. Educational programs, both group-oriented (formal) and self-directed (informal), focus on preschool and elementary-age children and their caregivers. A staff member—a page or clerk—is assigned every hour the space is open for use, and additional staff help when group programs are offered. Young children are not allowed in the area without caregivers, who provide many extra (and happy) hands to help keep order. Activities are devised to entice the child, but with an eye toward the adult caregiver as well. Some of the special issues that need to be managed include the balance of formal and informal activities and inclement weather conditions.

Programming is one of the most powerful elements of

the Explorium's mission. It holds the most hope for libraries that wish to be part of this movement. For libraries that have little or no outdoor space—though an outdoor classroom can be created out of a parking lot—programming offers a pathway to the Nature Explore movement. Engaging children and caregivers in nature literacy can be done simply by:

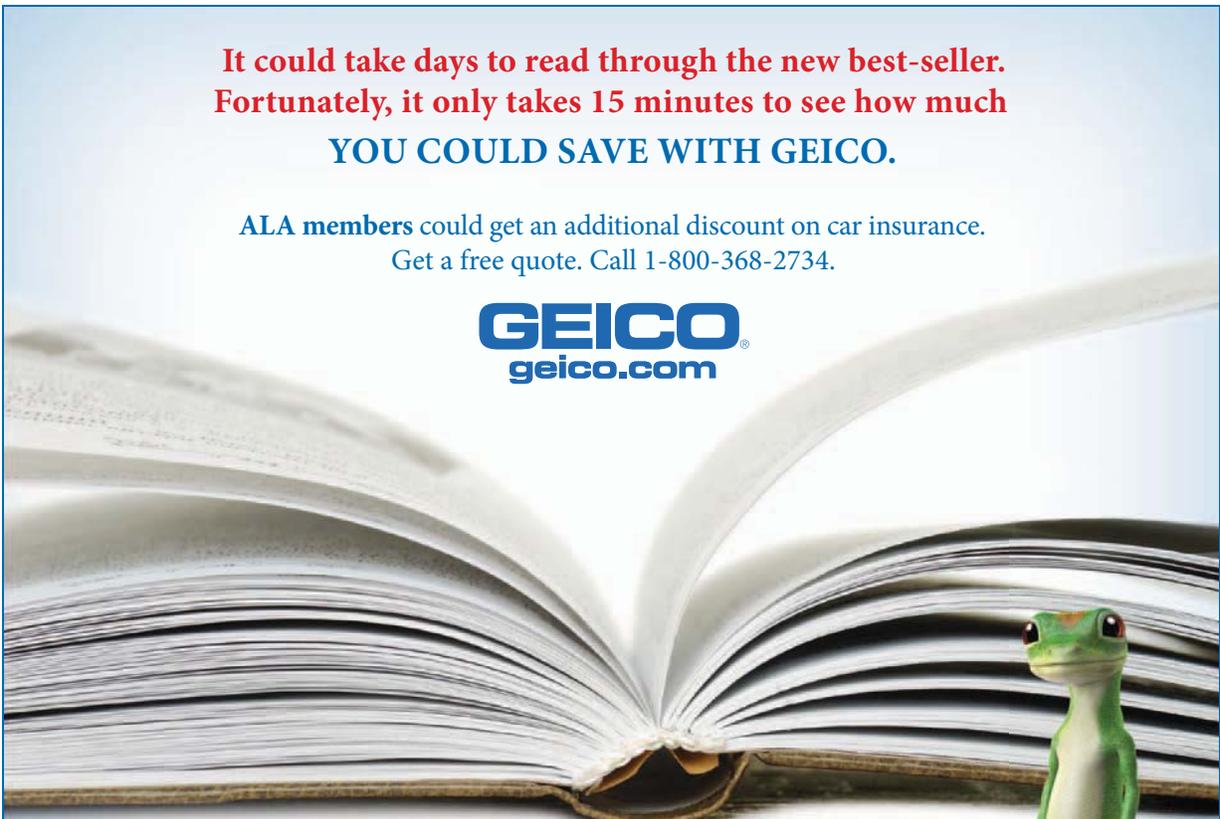
- Educating staff and providing programs on basic nature literacy facts, e.g., how water works, how plants grow, what library resources can help children understand nature.
- Developing a temporary outdoor space that can be used for programming. (Before the Explorium was created, MCPL purchased easily erected canopies and offered outdoor programs periodically.)
- Organizing a parent/teacher collection of books that provide ideas on outdoor activities for use in a childcare, community, or home setting.
- Conducting storytime programs that focus on books about the environment or natural settings, e.g., planting, growing, farming, parks.

The budget for the first two years of design and operation was \$340,000, which includes design development and construction, project management, and initial programming. The library spent \$180,000 to complete

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the design development, initial space preparation, and basic construction. The balance was raised by the MCPL Foundation and Friends. It is important to note that many past and new donors stepped up to the plate in support of the Explorium. Whatever the reason, it struck a chord with many supporters and, most importantly, for the staff. The Book Path brick campaign was particularly appealing to those who love books or were affected by stories or poems as parents or when they were growing up.

Results

After three years of planning and construction and a year of fundraising and program development, the Nature Explorium opened to an immediate and resounding success. Children and caregivers took to it naturally. Favorite spaces—the Splash It and Dig It areas—engage children in water play and good old-fashioned digging dirt. Caregivers comment regularly that they are so grateful that the library created the Explorium and they enjoy being in the out-of-doors with their children.

Statistics demonstrate our success:

- 70 children's programs were held, with 1,800 attendees from June through October.

- 840 children and their parents attended Universal Pre-K class visits during the month of October.

- 12 tours for staff from other libraries and youth services centers were provided.

- 340 participants attended Celebrate It! the official donor-recognition event.

Judging from our initial season, the Nature Explorium provides a new and exciting dimension to the library landscape of services. It connects library staff with nature literacy and environmental concerns and engages children in exploration, discovery, and multisensory learning. By providing this outdoor area for the community, the library offers a unique way to connect literacy, learning, and an appreciation for nature as a regular part of the library visit. ■



TRACY DELGADO-LASTELLA, coordinator of Youth Services and Museum Corner at Middle Country Public Library in Centereach, New York, and member of the steering committee of the Long Island Nature Collaborative for Kids (LINCK), was instrumental in the development of the Nature Explorium and currently administers it. **SANDRA FEINBERG**, director of the Middle Country Public Library and author of eight books on libraries, has overseen the creation of innovative projects including the Nature Explorium.

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