

Brushwood symposium welcomes future environmentalists



Sixth- and seventh-grade "Planet Protectors" from Cool Learning Experience. Young people from the Waukegan-based program created a presentation that will be part of the opening of this year's Smith Nature Symposium at Brushwood Center at Ryerson Woods.
 (Courtesy of Brushwood Center at Ryerson Woods)

Submitted by Brushwood Center at Ryerson Woods

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Brushwood Center at Ryerson Woods welcomes youth of the nature and community-based program Cool Learning Experience for the opening of this year's Smith Nature Symposium.

Brushwood Center believes it is important to start the symposium, a seven-part live streamed series exploring current environmental issues, with these voices of the future.

A partner of Brushwood Center, CLE is based in Waukegan and nurtures children's well-being through innovative learning programs that foster healthy relationships between families, the community and the natural world.

These students collaborated both virtually and live to create spoken word and structural art that reflects their life experiences. Their collective presentation, titled "Black, Brown and Green," explores their visions and actions for a more just and sustainable future.

"CLE is honored to be the first to bring youth voices to a Smith Nature Symposium," CLE Executive Director Barbara "Coyote" Waller said. "Their thoughtful art and powerful poetry speaks to the realities of our changing world. We believe those who join us will be inspired by their bravery, creativity, joy and resilience."

For over a decade, CLE has helped students grow a love of the outdoors through eco-excursions to local treasures like Lake Michigan. While CLE youth typically create work connected to outdoor experiences and environmental stewardship, their current expressions speak to the challenges of connecting to themselves, one another and the natural world amid a landscape marked by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The innovative instructional strategies of their coaches -- Jackie "Frog" Lopez, Angye "Bumble Bee" Zamudio and Deeksha "Flourite" Pagar -- will be on full display as the youth show how they brought the "Outdoors, Indoors."

The students will also reveal their secrets to building community, celebrating nature and inspiring well-being through a digital platform. For this special event, the sixth- through ninth-grade students have joined forces to bring Smith Nature Symposium attendees a peek into

their inquisitive minds and a deeper understanding of how CLE serves families, educates children and cares for the world around them.

The sixth- and seventh-grade Planet Protectors earn their moniker from their study of environmental, food and social justice issues that cross national and international borders. This summer's deep dive into the life cycle of plastics empowered students to be vocal environmental stewards at home and in their community.

Students connected to nature -- although digitally -- through experiments with local water sources, independent time outdoors and growing plants. Their online blog is a safe space to exchange ideas, share feelings and give tips on everything from recipes for food scraps to how to reduce landfill waste.

When not posting on their blog, these budding activists are learning healthy ways to communicate across cultures about the tough topics in today's headlines.

CLE's eldest group, the Future Champions, is made up of eighth- and ninth-graders poised to make their mark on the world. Like their name suggests, the group engages in forward-thinking activities related to future career choices. Along with designing their own websites, they lead an ongoing oral history project, Talking the Wauk, that centers on the Waukegan lakefront and its surrounding community.

Through interviews and research, these students amplify a diverse cadre of voices that re-imagine their city and their place within it. The Future Champions become ambassadors for nature and are ready to continue their journeys exploring the world and diverse career pathways with confidence, creativity and critical thinking.

"Brushwood Center is proud to partner with these future leaders and share their visions," said Catherine Game, executive director of Brushwood Center. "We know that CLE's work is life-changing and inspires the next generation of environmental stewards."

CLE has been positively impacting lives since 2008 when two First Baptist pastors hosted the first CLE summer learning program to link children and their families to nature with the belief that what one cares about, one cares for through actions and words.

Brushwood could not see a more fitting group to commence the Smith Nature Symposium, which was created to celebrate nature, the arts and individuals who have connected their communities to the environment and deepened understanding of the natural world.

This year's Smith Nature Symposium is virtual for the first time, which presents an opportunity for Brushwood Center to reach as many people as possible with these timely discussions. Ticket prices are "give what you can," with a free option available for students and those who are unable to donate.

The series begins Thursday, Aug. 13, and culminates in the Smith Nature Symposium Awards Ceremony on Friday, Oct. 2, with Bill Kurtis and Donna La Pietra serving as masters of ceremonies.

All funds raised from the symposium will directly support Thrive Together, Brushwood Center's COVID-19 crisis response for a more just and sustainable future. All presentations will be available in English and Spanish.

To learn more about the series, register to attend, or become a sponsor, visit www.smithnaturesymposium.org

(<http://www.smithnaturesymposium.org>).

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