

ALDO  LEOPOLD  
NATURE CENTER

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James wants to be a Naturalist when he grows up.

There are thousands of kids in the Dane County area. How many times do you hear one of them say they want to be a Naturalist? Much less a kid like James – smart, open, engaging but from a household living well below the poverty level.

It makes my heart sing.

I am a Naturalist at Aldo Leopold Nature Center. I work with kids every day whose outdoor experience is usually from the door to the car.

And I worry - every day - that this planet's survival will come down to small decisions *these kids* make as adults. And the values they pass to their children.

That's what makes Aldo Leopold Nature Center so necessary. This is the place where learning about the world happens - because this is the place you touch it.

This is the place that *you make happen* through your membership. And that's why I'm writing to you today – to ask that you **renew your membership**.

Because supporting a place where miracles happen is worth it.

A bus load of kids arrive and the grumbles start right away about having to go outside, about the cold and the group assignments, and about everything else going on with middle-schoolers.

Four hours later, the shy one who didn't want to be here gives a presentation on how trees breathe – from memory with no notes – smiling and laughing the entire time.

Miracles.

(Over, please)

Sure, you get discounts in the Gift Shop and breaks on summer camp tuition, too. ***But your membership also makes miracles happen.***

And that brings me back to James. Actually, I need to stop there and tell you that James is not his real name. Nor are any of the other names in this letter real. But their stories are real! And you've helped make them happen.

Here's what happened with James:

A couple weeks ago, Badger Rock Middle School kids came to the Aldo Leopold Nature Center for a field day.

On the way inside, one of the girls noticed a "dead thing" – it was a very small mammal.

We studied it in the field with the promise that I would get field guides to aid the students in identifying the creature later. During snack, we looked at field guides together, talking about possibilities. We narrowed it down to two shrews based on what we could remember.

Then, we strapped on our snowshoes and headed back out. Our first stop was to see if we could find the "dead thing" and identify it. It was James who found it. Everyone gathered around as I asked questions like, "Is it lighter on the underside than the top? What does its snout look like?" We compared it to pictures in the field guide.

In the end, we decided it was a masked shrew!

Suddenly, another little piece of the world made sense to James – maybe for the first time. Things can be known. They can be named. And we can learn to identify them.

In the words of Aldo Leopold, James began to "see the land, to understand what he sees, and enjoy what he understands."

Later, when we were gathering again to get on the bus, James told me he wanted to be a Naturalist when he grew up.

*It made my heart sing.*

The school district pays for the field trips, of course. But what they can pay is only a fraction of what it actually costs. And school budgets are being cut all the time.

Without members like you, supporting the programming at Aldo Leopold Nature Center, nature education will eventually get cut, too.



Masked Shrew

And there's so much more to do! For every James in the Dane County area, there are two kids who don't get to come to Aldo Leopold Nature Center.

That's why the Nature Center is launching its **annual membership drive**, and that's why you should reconnect with the miracles happening in this quiet corner of Monona.

Your membership gift today of \$100 or more makes it possible for James and thousands like him to learn enough about nature to even imagine that he could be a Naturalist.

Rejoin this amazing Nature Center and your heart will sing, too.

Here's another story – about Emily. For this one, I'll let her Mom tell it.

*Our daughter had a rough school year. She began to struggle massively with reading, and some time passed before we discovered she's one of the 20% of the population who suffer from dyslexia. She was tired from putting in twice the effort to do her reading homework as her peers, tired of hearing remarks from schoolmates "I don't want to be your reading partner because you read too slow[ly]", and she just wasn't her vivacious, curious, indomitable self. So I began to look for something that would allow her to recapture her passion for asking questions and exploring.*

*We tried one day of Spring Break at the Nature Center. When I picked her up that afternoon, I was greeted by a breathless little girl wearing one sneaker, one rain boot and her spare change of clothes, "Mom, I was collecting water samples, and I slipped and fell into the pond. It was awesome!" I knew from that point that I had my girl back.*

We Naturalists talk a lot about things growing. But the prairie grasses and the tadpoles, and the sand hill cranes and masked shrews aren't the only things growing here.

You and I are in this together, and together, we're growing young Naturalists. (Emily will be a Naturalist someday, too. She just doesn't know it yet!)

We're growing wonder and awe. We're growing curiosity. We're growing *miracles*.

**Thank you for being part of that.**

(Over, please)

But that's not the end of Emily's story:

*Emily spent most of the following July and August at the summer camp. She made a friend from Japan with whom she still corresponds. She now calls the Nature Center her "favorite place". At the end of the summer, she took my husband and me on a "tour" —we were both impressed at how many prairie plants she could name and talk about—how much biology she had learned. She could identify trees, some birds, and some insects. She had learned an amazing amount during a summer of exploration, hands-on learning and play.*

*I think that Nature Center summer camps may well be the best parenting decision my husband and I have made. I would recommend them to any parent who asked about them.*

Please help keep The Nature Center **growing**.

Please help ensure more students like James and Emily can visit and learn here at Aldo Leopold Nature Center by **renewing your membership today!**

These children are the future of our planet. By reaching them now, we make land stewards of them tomorrow.

Please be a part of that story; please be a part of that tomorrow.

This year, we're asking everyone to consider a renewal gift of \$100 or more. If you can give more, please be as generous as possible. If not, please find a gift that is right for you.

No gift is too small to support more young Naturalists – like James and Emily! – as they take part in future nature programs.

Thank you,



Coral Conant Gilles  
Naturalist

PS: Please make your membership gift today to support Nature Education at Aldo Leopold Nature Center!