Nature Connect

Fall 2026



Riverbend
ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION CENTER

Letter From Leadership

Dear Friends,

Thank you to the donors, educators, parents, volunteers, and friends who make Riverbend Environmental Education Center such a special place for children and families to learn, explore, and grow.

This year marks an exciting milestone as we begin renovating our beloved Barn, Riverbend's visitor center. While the building will be closed through spring 2027, these long-needed improvements will create a safer, more welcoming, and more sustainable home for environmental education—better serving campers, school groups, educators, and our community for years to come.

As construction progresses, we look forward to sharing progress with you and inviting you to see the transformation firsthand. Please keep an eye out for upcoming hard hat tours, where you will have the opportunity to step inside the project.

Stay tuned for a forthcoming invitation to support this once-in-a-generation renovation. Together, we can ensure the Barn remains a vibrant, durable, and mission-centered resource for today's Riverbend families and for generations of learners to come. Whether you are a longtime donor, a teacher who has brought students to Riverbend, or a parent whose child has discovered the joy of nature here, your charitable support keeps our doors open.

Thank you for believing in Riverbend's mission and for helping us build a sustainable future for nature education.

With gratitude,

Erin Reilly
Executive Director

Bryan Franey
Chair, Board of Directors



Financial Snapshot: FY 2025

Operating Revenue in FY 25
$1,748,354





Operating Expense in FY 25
$1,649,165

Programming - 72%

Administration - 15%

Fundraising - 13%

Take kids outside and watch what takes root.

One fall morning, a note appeared on Jill Crim's desk: "Two crows this morning."

Soon, more followed. Her fourth grade students had become fascinated with the crows gathering outside their classroom window and started recording what they saw—not because Jill had assigned a project, but because they had begun to think like scientists.

That kind of student-led discovery was something Jill had learned to make room for through Riverbend's Community of Practice. Before joining the teacher training program, she believed teaching meant being the person at the front of the room, directing each step. Now, she says, "We step back, stand to the side, and ask prompting questions while letting them uncover what they are learning on their own."

For Jill, who teaches at Whitehall, a Title I school where most students come from low-income households, letting go was not easy. But outdoors, away from worksheets and desks, she began to see abilities her classroom routines had not always revealed.

"It is hard to let go," she says, "but once you do, you see that they are more capable than I realized."

The change did not stop with Jill's class. She and fellow teacher Ann Marie McDonald created nature exploration kits filled with tools students could use to investigate whatever caught their attention outside. Then they made the kits available for any classroom in the school to borrow.

Before long, third graders were using the kits to lead kindergartners in outdoor investigations—teaching younger students through the same kind of questioning and discovery they had experienced themselves.

As Jill stepped back, her students' curiosity stepped in. They began looking more closely, asking their own questions, and following whatever caught their attention. Soon, that spirit of discovery spread beyond her classroom, as students shared what they had learned and guided younger classmates through investigations of their own.

The note on Jill's desk, "Two crows this morning," was more than an observation. It was evidence that curiosity had taken root.



Community of Practice Educators at John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge at Tinicum



2025 Impact Numbers

Students who received programs for free in the 2025-2026 school year:

6,564

Students Taught in the 2025-2026 school year:

11,882

Total Number of people served:

13,667

Number of People who attended events:

1,137

Teachers who received ongoing professional development in the 2025-2026 school year:

19

Program hour spent with students in low-income schools:

70%

Summer Camp Scholarships awarded:

51

Public Events held on the Preserve:

17

Number of Donated hours by Volunteers:

540

Trees and Native Shrubs planted on the Preserve:

221 trees **68** shrubs

Still wading in.

Some kids go to summer camp. **Natalie Smith** went to Riverbend, where she discovered a love of nature that, more than thirty years later, still shapes her daily life.

She arrived as a kid who loved animals, especially horses. Riverbend gave her something different: an entry point into nature that wasn't manicured or fenced in. What she remembers most is the stream. "Finding crawfish and the awe of [critters] in the pond," she says. "It's this endless moment of awe — all these little things you notice when you slow down and just get to play."

Riverbend's nature preserve also gave Natalie something she hadn't experienced before. Growing up on the Main Line, she says, "you live a very curated life." At Riverbend, she could get muddy, touch a bug and stop worrying about ruined clothes. It was a kind of freedom she hadn't known before.

"It's okay," she says. "It actually opens up a lot of joy." Natalie is in her forties now, and she is still wading into local waters. Today, she volunteers in conservation, working with communities across Pennsylvania to protect the same kinds of watersheds she first learned to love as a child.

"I do a stream assessment and a macroinvertebrate study and feel giddy," she says. "It brings me right back to that original spark." She gardens with native plants, hikes every chance she gets, and monitors water quality on the Upper Lehigh River.

At Riverbend today, children are still turning over rocks, finding crawfish and frogs, and discovering what happens when they are given the freedom to get close to the natural world. That spark of discovery takes hold every day across Riverbend's 30 acres.

More than three decades later, the stream is still doing what it did for Natalie: turning a child's curiosity into a lifelong relationship with nature.

Opposite: Natalie Smith enjoying time outdoors







For the first time in 29 years, Riverbend gets a major renovation!

Through spring 2027, the Barn at the heart of our Nature Preserve will be transformed into a more welcoming home for a generation of campers, students, and families.

While construction is underway, the rest of the preserve and trails will remain open. The stream, ponds, Musical Forest, Story Trail, fort building area, picnic areas, and composting toilet will all be accessible.

Interested in a hard hat tour?
Scan to get on the list.