

In a year that tested us all, you kept hope alive

As your land trust, RPA is committed to working with and serving our community today and for the long term. Together with you—our members, volunteers, and supporters—we are building hope even through the most troubling times.

While 2020 tested this shared effort more than ever, with both the COVID-19 pandemic and the unearthing of racial inequities in America and the outdoors, it also highlighted how irreplaceable time in nature really is for healthy human communities.

I'll never forget how, when the shutdowns and virus surges hit Rensselaer County and people needed places outdoors to exercise, relax, and draw strength, RPA's lands were there for them—because of people like you.

Your commitment and compassion made it all possible.

Amazingly, this energy for community-driven change did not dwindle in 2020. And I can see why. People need healthy forests, clean water, and accessible trails as much as the land depends on our stewardship and foresight.

This is what motivated masked-up volunteers to work for nine days straight in a heat wave to build a new trail at Barberville Falls, giving people access to this beautiful place throughout the summer.

A record number of land conservation projects are now in the queue, safeguarding and connecting key forest areas for wildlife, water quality, and recreation.

This summer, the RPA board and staff made a commitment to work toward a more inclusive outdoors where all people, regardless of race, are welcome and safe on our trails. We've started with regular readings and discussions in which we examine our own implicit biases. From there, we can begin to create a space that is safe for our entire community.

The pandemic isn't behind us, and access to nature is not yet equal. Development pressure is rising in Rensselaer County due to Covid's impact on our cities. The risks of flooding, habitat loss, and other effects of climate change aren't going away.

But neither is the will to stand for what is most important—healthy and equitable human communities intertwined with clean air and water and a thriving local ecology.

Thank you for keeping this hope alive. Together, we are building the world we want to live in and pass on to future generations.

With gratitude and respect,

Jim Bonesteel

Executive Director, Rensselaer Plateau Alliance



Lucia Skwarek and Alex Gutierrez (left and middle) met Karen Arndt (right) on the land they all love. In 2020, Lucia and Alex donated a beautiful 65-acre forest with a sensitive wetland.

Two families, one forest, and a gift to the future

When Karen Arndt learned that her grandparents' former house was for sale about five years ago, she knew she had to buy it and fix it up. As a girl, she'd spent summer vacations and weekends exploring the surrounding woods, climbing big white pine trees, and picking blueberries in the 28-acre wetland.

Karen was happy to have this beloved home back in the family, but she was worried about what would happen to the forest and wetland, which no longer belonged with the house.

"This fall, my daughter took a walk behind the house and found some trees marked with yellow tape," Karen explains. "Really hoping that it wasn't being surveyed for development, I left a note on one of the trees with my number. I got a call a few days later from RPA and found out that the land had been donated for conservation and that volunteers were clearing a hiking trail. I was thrilled."

Karen can thank Alejandro (Alex) Gutierrez and Lucia Skwarek. In 1994, a 65-acre parcel—including Karen's childhood pines and wetland—came up for sale. They walked the land and saw seven great blue heron nests in the wetland.

"We were sold," Lucia says, looking back. "When our children were young, we carried them in backpacks on the land. When they were older, we loved to catch salamanders in the marsh."



In summer 2020, they donated the entire property to RPA. With their kids grown, they weren't using the land as often and were also concerned for its future in the face of development pressure.

Lucia and Alex were inspired in part by Albert Family Community Forest in East Nassau. Their hope is for the site—now called Gutierrez Family Forest—to become a place for the community and for it to be part of a network of conserved forestland.

"We were sold. When our children were young, we carried them in backpacks on the land. When they were older, we loved to catch salamanders in the marsh." — Lucia, land donor

On a sunny afternoon in November, Karen, Alex, and Lucia met on the land and walked the new trail together, through the pines and along the wetland. Karen showed old photos of her house in 1950, then an abandoned barn. The barn was transformed by her grandparents into a home—through decades of hard work—before leaving the family.

"The house was out of my family for around 30 years," Karen says, "and to be able to bring it back is indescribable. Now to have the forest immediately surrounding our little parcel protected for wildlife and available for people to enjoy is just amazing."

"Really hoping that it wasn't being surveyed for development, I left a note on one of the trees...I got a call a few days later from RPA and found out that the land had been donated for conservation and that volunteers were clearing a hiking trail. I was thrilled."

—Karen Arndt, neighbor to Guiterrez Family Forest

Karen plans to keep the house in the family as her grandparents wanted, and for it to again be a place where her cousins and extended family members can gather. Thanks to Alex and Lucia's donation—and support from RPA's members and volunteers—children will be falling in love with big old pines and picking blueberries for years to come.

Finding solace and support in nature

When Molly Freiberg and her husband Clement moved to East Nassau from Philadelphia in late 2018, she hoped to find community and a place to put down roots.

Molly's career as a social worker in hospice and palliative care had left her emotionally depleted. She needed to unwind and heal. Moving to the Capital Region for Clement's job, the couple chose the Rensselaer Plateau for its wild and peaceful natural setting.

That winter, she opened the paper and found an announcement for a New Year's hike at Poestenkill Community Forest. "That's perfect!" she remembers thinking.

On a chilly morning with a dusting of fresh snow, Molly and Clement met a lively group of RPA members and volunteers for the hike. It was just the kind of welcoming community she was looking for.

So much so that she now works with RPA as Community Engagement Manager. A Kripalucertified Mindful Outdoor Guide, she has been holding monthly mindful nature walks at the community forests and other RPA lands.

Molly's walks include the practice of "forest bathing," or Shinrin-yoku, a Japanese tradition that became a therapeutic treatment for stress in Japan and then spread across the globe.

The walks encourage participants to slow down, use all their senses, and engage more fully with nature. Studies show that this kind of present-centered awareness calms the central nervous system and can help reduce stress and physical pain. Jennifer, a regular attendee of the walks, reflects, "In times of anxiety and strife, nature helps me feel calm, clear, and hopeful. It truly is the best medicine."

Reaching new communities with nature-based mindfulness

With the goal of helping to address community problems and foster empathy and understanding through conservation, Molly has been building new partnerships and holding mindful nature programs with area organizations.

Groups like the NOpiates Committee, the Alzheimer's Association of Northeastern New York, and the New York Master

> Teacher's Program have all tapped into the uplifting power of these outdoor immersion programs.

The NOpiates Committee, a local grassroots organization that raises addiction and prevention

awareness and supports those who have been affected by substance use disorders, was particularly drawn to the idea of connecting with nature's healing qualities.

In Rensselaer County, the opioid epidemic has derailed the lives of many. Between 2012 and 2019, the county lost 169 people to overdoses. And the pandemic has made this worse. In the eight months between January 1 and August 31, 2020, 54 county residents died from overdose.

For NOpiates cofounders Tim and Kim Murdick, who lost their son Sean to an accidental overdose in 2015, partnering





Molly's monthly nature walks are a chance to slow down and open the senses. All are welcome.

with Molly was a chance to create something uniquely safe for the people they serve. "Time in nature with others who share similar feelings and experiences is a unique gift," Kim says.

A place to connect

On a blustery Saturday morning in November, Molly and Sandy Wilson, also a Mindful Outdoor Guide, gathered with Tim, Kim and almost 20 community members affected in some way by addiction at Poestenkill Community Forest.

Molly and Sandy started the walk at Dorothy's Equal Access trail. As they crossed the bridge over a wetland, Molly invited participants to let go of anything they didn't want to carry for the next few hours. The group walked slowly, breathed deeply, and noticed new sights, smells, sounds and textures.

There was also time to share feelings of grief and stories of recovery. Some mentioned feeling at ease for the first time in a while, with positive childhood memories of outdoor experiences coming to mind. Others expressed how connecting to the forest that day could support them on their journey of healing.

For Kim, the walk offered a peaceful experience to draw from in the future. "As a parent of a child who passed from an accidental overdose, I often carry many feelings that can be difficult to share. Entering the forest, I decided to listen to Molly and leave my baggage behind for a while. I was able to soak in the wonderful things that nature offers. Now I have a positive memory that I can return to when I need that sense of calm."

Molly is looking forward to more collaborations like the one with NOpiates, where she can share nature with those in need of grounding or support.

"In the woods, I can feel free even when life is overwhelming. I can feel amazed, calmed, connected, and restored. Sharing this experience and joy with others is even better," Molly says.

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Sharing this experience and joy

-Molly Freiberg

"Following the Forest" for climate resilience

Fall 2020 wasn't a typical college semester for most students, with remote classes and cancelled plans. For Kaylie Chilek, an Environmental Engineering major at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, it turned out to be an important stepping-stone on her journey into conservation and climate solutions.

Kaylie has always loved animals. While growing up in rural Texas, she learned about the threats that climate change poses to wildlife—and humans—and she wanted to make a difference.

Looking for a fall internship where she could dip her toes in the conservation field, Kaylie reached out to Dan Morse, RPA's Volunteer, Program, and Outreach Manager. She mentioned her interest in climate and wildlife.

"I wanted to do something related to climate change, and when I read about the rare wildlife species on the Plateau, I wondered if there was some way to directly help them," Kaylie says.

Dan realized that Kaylie's interests might mesh well with Follow the Forest (FTF), a regional partnership of conservation groups that includes RPA.

The goals of FTF are to conserve links and corridors between the forests, fields, and wetlands across eastern New York and western New England. These corridors will allow wildlife to move, especially as the climate warms, to find the habitat they need to survive.

Hosted by Housatonic Valley Association (HVA)—a land trust focused on the Housatonic watershed from the Berkshires to Long Island Sound—Follow the Forest's success will rely on active partners like RPA. Partner organizations can do the necessary "ground-truthing" field work in their service area – meaning, making visits to evaluate the possible corridors that have been identified on a map.

"I wanted to do something related to climate change, and when I read about the rare wildlife species on the Plateau, I wondered if there was some way to directly help them."

Brendan Boepple of HVA was thrilled to work with Kaylie. They planned her visits to places where the Rensselaer Plateau connects with the neighboring Berkshires and Green Mountains. In this, Kaylie laid the groundwork for other partner organizations to do their own field work. "Kaylie's work was as much about the wildlife linkages on the Plateau as it was about creating methods that could be used by other conservation partners—an important step for this ambitious project," Brendan says.

RPA's involvement in Follow the Forest is also key because of the Plateau's value to conservation. As Brendan explains, "The Rensselaer Plateau is just the type of refuge needed for plants and animals to adapt to a warming climate. It also plays an outsized role in wildlife connectivity in the forests that cover much of our region."







Blackburnian warblers, Bobcat, and red eft salamanders are just a few of the many species that live on the Rensselaer Plateau and depend on large, connected forests and unimpeded waterways—especially as the climate warms.

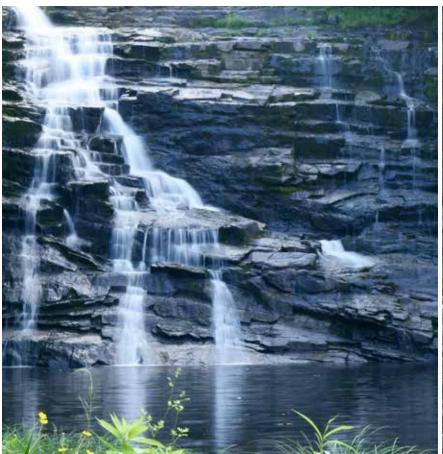
Kaylie's project gave her some new skills for her future work in conservation, including the basics of the ArcGIS mapping program and managing a small team.

As for her interest in wildlife, Kaylie was surprised by the diversity of wildlife on the Rensselaer Plateau. She recalls seeing her first red eft salamander on one of the first days of her internship, which was very different from any species she knew from Texas. "The color was striking against the dark ground—almost neon," she says.

While doing her ground-truthing field work in the northwest section of the Plateau, she was amazed to see firsthand how much forestland there is and all the potential for conserved corridors.

Kaylie saw how the long-term health of the Rensselaer Plateau's sensitive ecosystems and species—from the red eft to the moose, goshawk, and bear—will depend on RPA's members and volunteers as well as land trusts across the region.

"It was really cool to be part of something so big in the fight against habitat loss and climate change, and to make it easier for other organizations to do their field work, too" Kaylie says. Not a bad semester at all.





A chance for Barberville Falls to shine

For decades, Tom Hohman lived next to one of Rensselaer County's most stunning and dramatic waterfalls, Barberville Falls, in the town of Poestenkill. Tom grew up and raised his family in a nearby farmhouse. He harnessed hydropower from the falls to run his sawmill and heat his home.

The 140-acre Barberville Falls Preserve, owned by The Nature Conservancy (TNC), was just across the waterfall from Tom's property. Part of the preserve was on his side of the water, downstream of his sawmill.

The preserve and 92-foot waterfall were a major attraction but lacked adequate parking or trails. Visitors would park unsafely and cut through private property to reach the falls.

"Sometimes I'd be working in the sawmill and people would just walk right up to me and ask me where the falls were," Tom chuckles.

Over the years, Tom and his neighbors witnessed unpleasant and dangerous behavior, such as loud parties, vandalism, and accidents at the falls. Clashes between visitors and neighbors turned into bitter feelings and gave the preserve a reputation of trouble.



To minimize issues, TNC decided in 2012 to close the preserve between Memorial Day and Labor Day each year. That helped, but it wasn't a long-term solution.

TNC started looking for a new owner for this beautiful but challenging preserve. They offered it to the town of Poestenkill and to other land trusts.

No one wanted it.

At RPA, we imagined what this Plateau gem could become with local attention. "We just thought – if not now, when," board member Shari Gibbs reflects. In August 2019, TNC transferred the entire property to RPA along with generous funding to match two grants for improving infrastructure.

Some thought it was a risky move. RPA Executive Director Jim Bonesteel recalls Tom Hohman's initial response: "I know you mean well, but you don't know what you're getting into. No amount of new signs will solve the problems."

"For RPA," Jim says, "this was exciting, and we were honored that TNC entrusted us with the land. But we knew we had to find a way to get past the history. We started by forming a committee of neighbors and others who wanted to help guide decisions."

With COVID-19, the need was greater than ever.

Little did we know that 2020 would bring a pandemic and a shutdown, sending many more people outdoors to visit each of RPA's preserves. On sunny spring days, Barberville Falls was flooded with visitors, sometimes with 30 or more cars parked along Plank Road.

In response to this community need for nature, our new volunteer committee discussed keeping the preserve open throughout the summer—something that hadn't occurred since 2012.

But first the preserve needed a larger parking area and a safe trail down the steep gorge to the falls. We planned a new parking area on Blue Factory Road, closer to the falls, and a crew of professionals and volunteers scouted a trail. Thanks to COVID-19, the necessary grant funding to cover these projects was on hold.

The community stepped up, donating time, materials, and talent

Thankfully, many hands joined in to pull it off. Warren W. Fane, Inc. donated the materials for the parking area, and EMI Earth Movers donated time building it. Neighbor to the preserve Doug McLaren, and RPA treasurer Walter Kersch, brought energy and equipment. We were also able to borrow from RPA's operating reserves, and the 16-car parking area came together swiftly.

Next, Jim talked to Fran Egbert, leader of the Rensselaer Land Trust / Rensselaer Plateau Alliance Volunteer Trail Crew about creating a trail in time for summer. This would mean working on steep terrain, extra hours, and heavy stonework. The crew talked it over. "People really needed it—especially this year with Covid," Fran says, "and we just decided we had to do it."

The trail crew spent nine days in a row, including through a June heat wave, building a new trail to the falls. "The excitement for the finished trail kept us moving," Fran says.

Before June was over, Fran's crew had finished the Falls Trail, complete with stone steps and even a beautiful staircase made of wood from the surrounding forest. For the first time in a long time, there was a safe route down to the falls.

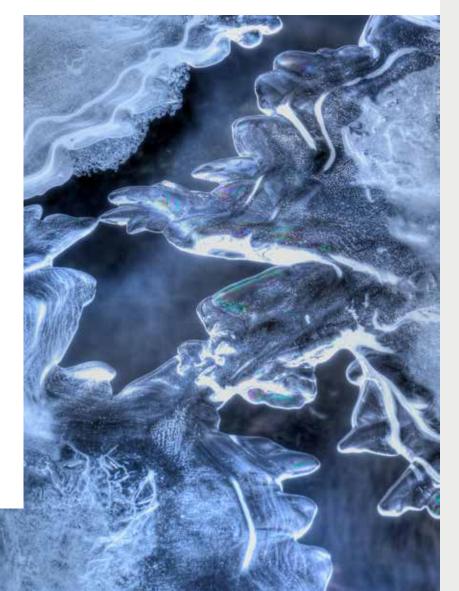
We re-opened the preserve a few days before our goal of July 1st, and the community immediately embraced the new trail and parking area. Dozens of hikers, birders, and walkers enjoyed the

preserve throughout the summer, and into the fall and winter.

This note from one visitor, Jeff Wasbes, captures a sentiment expressed by others as well. "My wife and kids and I went out for what I expected to be a quick visit to Barberville Falls. The experience was very different from what I remember from my youth. I was delighted to find a parking area and marked trails ... We spent a beautiful extended morning hiking the rim trail and visiting the falls. I didn't expect to be able to share that experience with my family."

Tom Hohman no longer lives in the house next to the falls, but he still works in his sawmill. He's pleased the preserve is in RPA's hands. "It's still a work in progress," he says, "but it is better. I don't have anyone walking through my sawmill anymore."

Jeff and Tom's gratitude belongs to our volunteers, neighbors, and you, our supportive members, for giving Barberville Falls a chance to shine.





Fran (left) a retired hospice nurse, is a leader in conserving the Rensselaer Plateau, and helping connect others to nature. She and Marcy (right) enjoy lunch by the water during a day of trail work. Volunteers like Fran and Marcy are the heart and soul of our oganization.

Volunteer Spotlight

For Francille Egbert, blazing trails and empowering others is a way of life

"It started with Marcy Steinberg and me," Fran recalls. "We'd be out walking, and we would just start clearing the trails as we went. Just a stick here and a log there. Then we decided to bring some tools out and invite other women to work with us."

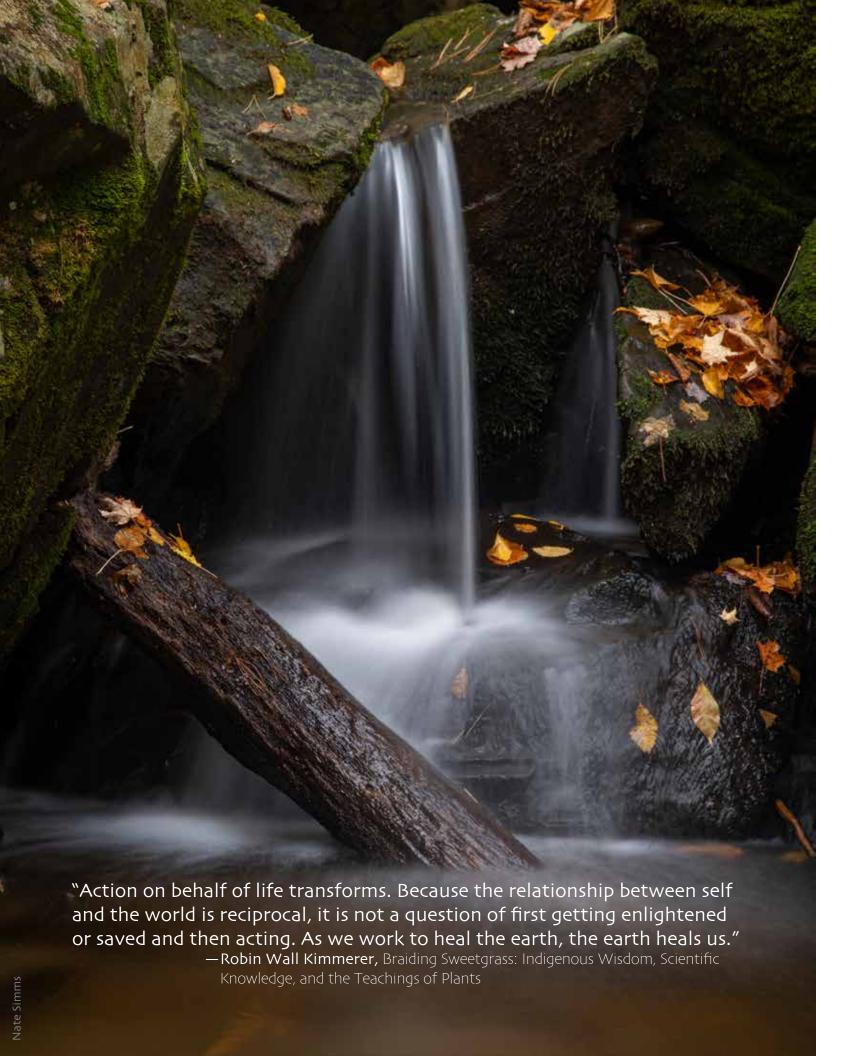
In those early days of the Rensselaer Land Trust (RLT)/Rensselaer Plateau Alliance (RPA) Volunteer Trail Crew, an all-female group built and maintained trails throughout Rensselaer County. Fran wanted to give women a chance to work with new tools, build strength, and learn skills together.

"Eventually some guys joined the group, but I still like to make sure they don't take the harder stuff that we all enjoy doing," Fran, a retired hospice nurse, says.

The lighthearted yet tireless crew is responsible for many miles of trails and bridges on RPA and RLT properties, and they also work on State lands and others places where people can get close to nature. They never seem to pass up an opportunity to create more access.

Fran was also a force behind the formation of RPA, along with a small group of neighbors who first floated the idea of conserving the Plateau. She was a founding member of RPA, a board member until early 2020, and is still a key organizer of programs and outings for RLT and RPA.

Fran's ongoing leadership and compassion—together with you, our members—helps make the forests of the Rensselaer Plateau a place to play, move, and learn. *Thank you, Fran!*





Jeff Briggs (left) led the way on RPA's first ADA-compliant accessible trail.

A Trail for Everyone: Dorothy's Equal Access Trail

For Jeff Briggs, retired ecologist and Poestenkill Community Forest's volunteer steward, the community forest's miles of hiking trails weren't enough. He wanted a way for people with limited mobility to enjoy nature, too.

Jeff educated himself on the requirements and possibilities of accessible trails, compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and started scouting for a location within the Poestenkill Community Forest. He wanted something close to parking but with exposure to different habitats.

With guidance from experts, help from volunteers, and donated gravel, lumber, and professional services, Jeff's dream of an accessible trail in nature came true and the trail was completed in Fall 2020. Now many more people will be able to relax among hemlocks and pause by a wetland with no cars in sight.

And the name? It's for Jeff's mother, Dorothy, who relied on a wheelchair later in her life. Jeff remembers taking her for car rides and having few options of places to enjoy the outdoors together. That's when he started thinking about accessibility. "Now here we are," Jeff says, "with a trail for everyone."

Jeff and RPA thank McCrea Burnham of New York State Department of Environmental Conservation for guidance on the trail route and regulatory issues.

We also thank the RLT–RPA volunteer Trail Crew for their hard work; Warren W. Fane, Inc, for donating gravel and loaning equipment; Callanan Industries, Inc. for donating stone dust; and Jim Slavin for donating materials to complete a boardwalk over the wetland.

There are so many ways to care for the Rensselaer Plateau

The need is great in 2021. Development pressure is rising in Rensselaer County due to Covid's impact on our cities. Our shared need for nature as a safe, inclusive, and restorative place to relax will continue. Our local action can help minimize flooding, habitat loss, and other effects of climate change.

Plan a gift to future generations

Options for planned giving include leaving a gift of any size in your will or planning a gift of real estate.

Give back with a Qualified Charitable Distribution

If you are 70½ years or older and must take the Required Minimum Distribution (RMD) from your IRA, a Qualified Charitable Distribution could be used to satisfy the RMD by making a direct, trustee-to-trustee transfer to the Rensselaer Plateau Alliance.

Join the Woods & Water Heritage Circle

If your annual gifts add up to \$1,000, we invite you to be part of this leadership circle and to enjoy a special event with other members.

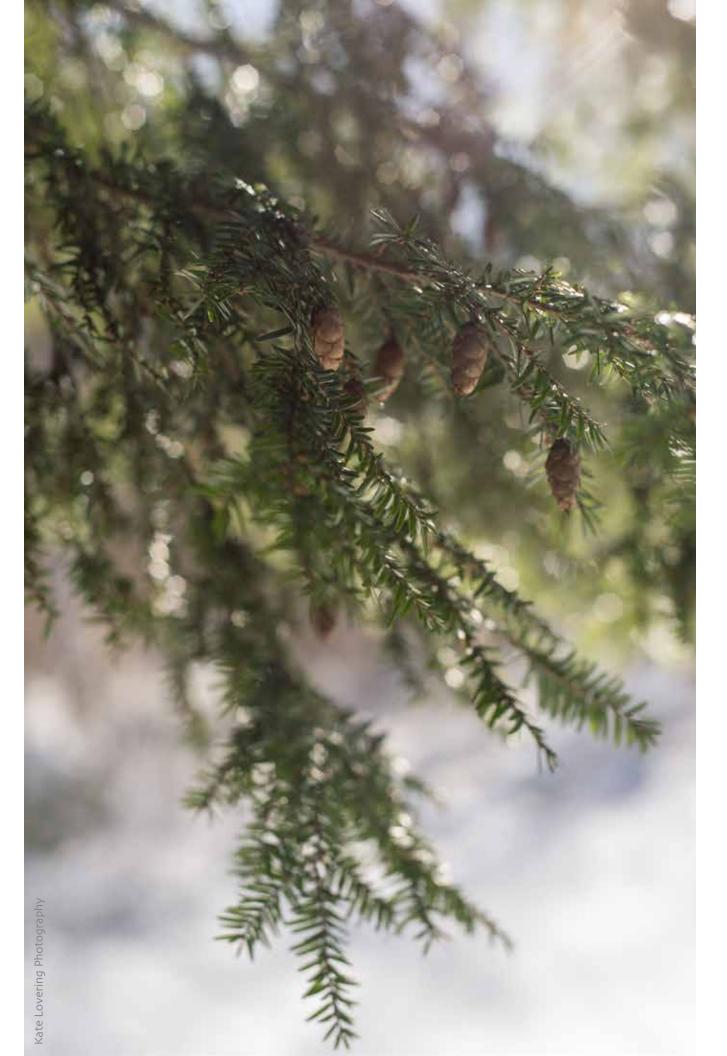
Donate stock

A gift of stock can provide you with financial and tax benefits while supporting conservation.

Volunteer

Stand up for forests and your community by building trails, sharing your talents to lead an outing, or doing office work. Send an e-mail to Dan Morse at dan@rensselaerplateau.org to learn more.

Reach out to Jim Bonesteel for a confidential discussion of your giving options at 518-712-9211 or jim@rensselaerplateau.org.



Thank you, 2020 Gala Sponsors

What a year it was. Despite all odds, these local businesses stepped up for conservation and allowed our 2020 Spring Woodland Gala to come through as an important fundraiser. We had to cancel the annual event due to COVID-19, yet these committed sponsors, Honorary Committee Members, and ticket holders stayed with us—and made all the difference.

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A VERY SPECIAL THANK YOU

All Gala Honorary Committee Members & General Ticket holders who converted their tickets to donations once the Gala was canceled due to COVID-19.

RPA's tireless, creative volunteer Gala Committee

2019 Income



- Government Grants \$155,318
- Individual Contributions \$295,784
- Foundations and trust grants \$31,500
- Special Events Income \$25,469
- Other Income \$17,812

Total \$525,883

2019 Expenses



- Program Services \$333,720
- Fundraising \$51,379
- Management and General \$39,204

Total \$424,303

Monthly giving boosts conservation, all year long

Do you know you can make a difference every day with a sustaining membership? Monthly gifts—whether \$10, \$25, or \$100—make conservation possible year-round.

A big Thank You to our 2019 Monthly Donors

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Want to make a difference each month? Let us know, or visit rensselaerplateau.org/donate.

Look what you made possible in just one year...



35 teens empowered by time with the land



152 acres conserved, over 1,200 in progress



5,000 hours of volunteer time & talent





"Volunteering and building trails with my family gives me a break from technology,

—Simone, grade nine





Thanks to all who made 2019 a wonderful year for conservation on the Rensselaer Plateau.

Donations for fiscal year January 1, 2010 to December 31, 2010. 2020 donors will be acknowledged in our 2020 Annual Report.

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Mindful Nature Walks

Saturdays: 2/13 (full), 3/13, and 4/10

Monthly walks are led by Kripalu-certified Mindful
Outdoor Guides Molly Freiberg and Sandy Wilson.

Writing about Nature and Place via Zoom

Saturdays: 3/27 & 4/3

Writer and educator Rama Hamarneh presents.

Clean Energy & Climate Solutions Talk

Thursday, 4/15 at 7:00 pm

With Ethan Winter, Senior Community Engagement Manager at Cypress Creek Renewables.

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