

A photograph of a forest stream with a sunburst effect in the background. The sun is low in the sky, creating a bright starburst pattern that illuminates the scene. The stream flows over mossy rocks and fallen leaves, with the water appearing slightly blurred to convey movement. The surrounding forest is dense with tall, thin trees, and the ground is covered in a layer of brown leaves and green moss.

Rensselaer Plateau Alliance

Conservation Through Community

Winter 2017/Spring 2018

"Ask yourself 'What if I had never seen this before?
What if I knew I would never see it again?'"

– Rachel Carson



Nate Simms

Taking time for family and nature

It's that time of year when so many of us take stock of the things that matter most, like family and home. As winter sets in, I'm so grateful for my amazing family and our home in the woods of the Rensselaer Plateau.

My wife Jill and I realize how very lucky we are to be raising our children Noah, Sammy, and Tannis with forests and water right in their backyard. All three of them love nature, and as a family we're quick to take advantage of winter snows for cross-country skiing and snowshoeing.

And it's something we don't take for granted. We know, just like you, that these beautiful woodlands are vulnerable to haphazard development; chopping them up so that they no longer function as woodlands for wildlife habitat, forestry, or community recreation.

That's one of the reasons I'm so inspired by so many families who are working to support and create local conservation, right here, close to home.

Whether it's the families who conserve their lands, like several of our recent land projects — Chestnut Hill in Stephentown, Grafton Forest in Grafton, and the Albert Family Community Forest in East Nassau — or those who are contributing their time as volunteers and sending in donations to make this all become a reality — it's that sense of what matters that keeps so many of us inspired.

These projects couldn't happen without you. Thank you for caring and for safeguarding the clean air and water, natural beauty, abundant wildlife, working



Above: Jim with his family on a vacation hike.
Top: an early-morning view of Grafton Forest.

forests, and family life on the Rensselaer Plateau and beyond. It's because of our collective efforts that future families will be able to share what we love and cherish today.

This winter, I hope you can take time with family and friends out in the woodlands, trails, and meadows that make Rensselaer County so special. In the meantime, best wishes for a warm holiday season and joyful winter.

Jim Bonesteel
Executive Director jim@rensselaerplateau.org

A “Children’s Forest” Takes Root

If you sometimes feel like a strong connection with nature is slipping away for kids these days you would be right. According to the Child Mind Institute, the average American child spends 4 to 7 minutes a day in unstructured play outdoors, and over 7 hours a day in front of a screen.

A growing body of research also links regular outdoor education to improved mental and physical health in children. And if children don’t spend regular, fun, and interactive time in nature they are less likely to care about it when they grow up.

That means that unless we act now, the next generation’s love of nature is as threatened as the land, habitat, and wildlife itself. Thanks to you, and growing community support, that action is happening with the launch of the first “Children’s Forest” in the Northeast, right here on the Rensselaer Plateau.

What is it?

A Children’s Forest — a concept created by the U.S. Forest Service — is not a specific place, but a program to get kids and families out in nature. Our program is based upon a diverse partnership between the Dyken Pond Environmental Education Center, Grafton Lakes State Park, the Rensselaer Plateau Alliance (RPA), and local school districts to promote opportunities for kids to play and learn in nature.

It’s an exciting first step in creating the stepping stones to nature; allowing children first to discover and explore, then to understand, and ultimately to become stewards of the environment. Down the road we hope to offer this program at various grade levels, in as many schools as possible, and along with teacher training in opportunities such as Project Learning Tree and Project Wild.

In addition to the generosity of individuals, funding for the program includes the Ann Allen Cetrino Family Foundation, the Land Trust Alliance-DEC New York State Partnership Program, the Connect Kids to Parks Field Trip Grant Program (funded through the Environmental Protection Fund), and Friends of Dyken Pond. This kind of collaboration is what long-term conservation will need to last for generations.

Thank you for making the future of conservation look brighter, every day.



Over the past several months staff from RPA, Dyken Pond, and Grafton Lakes State Park have been meeting with superintendents and teachers from several school districts. So far, four schools have signed up for a 3rd-grade program that will include a field trip to Dyken Pond or Grafton Lakes as well as pre- and post-trip classroom visits by environmental educators.

The Gift of a new Community Forest

The Albert Family Community Forest has truly been a multi-generational family project.

Forty years ago, shortly after getting married, Kevin and Mary Albert bought a little farmhouse with 80 acres in East Nassau as their weekend retreat from New York City. They loved being on the end of a dirt road, able to hike and enjoy nature right out the backdoor. Their children Sarah and Matthew loved it, too.



Over the next 10 years several neighboring parcels came up for sale. The Alberts worried that the forest and woodlands that surrounded them might be lost, displacing wildlife as well as the opportunities for providing for clean water and hiking.

So, one-by-one they purchased lands at risk for development until, ultimately, they owned 350 acres of forest.

Kevin notes that, as with many busy families, life moved quickly. "Soon 10 years turned into 20, and we realized we wanted to live year-round in the area. We found a house in Malden Bridge and rented out the little farm house on the 350 acres to our daughter's family. That worked out great for a while, but it became clear that this was only a short-term solution to conserving the land. We wanted to give back to this community as it had played such an important part in our family's lives."

That all changed this past year when the Alberts sold the property to the Rensselaer Plateau Alliance at a deeply discounted rate to become a community forest.

No gift, or passion, too small

Are you interested in helping to create new community forests, establish trails and educational programs, enhance streams and wetlands, and support local families to conserve their land for wildlife habitat, hunting, forestry, or recreation? A gift through your will is an easy way to do so and can go a long way to conserving the lands you love, close to home.

Call or email Jim Bonesteel, at 518-712-9211 or jim@rensselaerplateau.org for a confidential discussion about what feels right to you. If you've already included the Rensselaer Plateau Alliance in your will, thank you. We'd love to hear from you so we can thank you in person.

“We wanted this beautiful forestland to become a resource for people of all ages to get out and enjoy nature long into the future, much like we had been able to do, when our family used the land,” explained Mary Albert.

A place for the community

And so, this past fall, as the fall colors sparkled under a blue sky on a warm Saturday in October, over 70 people of all ages were gathered for a ribbon-cutting ceremony at the new Albert Family Community Forest.

Kevin Albert spoke of his hopes for the new preserve as a community resource.

“We’re gonna continue to enjoy it, and we hope you do too, and that others come and enjoy it. That’s gonna be the real measure of success of this Community Forest,” Kevin said.

When debating on a name for the new Community Forest, at first the Alberts weren’t sure they wanted their name to be part of it. “It felt a bit odd to have our name associated with this Community Forest, but ultimately we wanted to impress upon our grandchildren the importance of giving back to their community and conservation,” explained Mary, continuing, “we love the land, and it’s now going to be a special place for so many others too.”

Just as with the Poestenkill Community Forest, a committee made up of community members helps make decisions about land use and management and helps steward the property. Already, thanks to an incredible group of volunteers and friends, and community support and donations, there’s a new entrance road, parking area, and kiosk, as well as nearly four miles of new trails.



Butterfly Dreams

Rebecca Allmond grew up in a small town on the outskirts of the Capital Region. As a girl she explored the woodland edges of her lakeside home stalking and catching grasshoppers, lightning bugs, and – yes – butterflies.

The butterflies were her favorite. “They danced around the meadows outside my home and enticed me. I thought of them as some kind of fairy-like creature, ethereal and magical. Their colors and patterns were captivating and lively. I simply loved them and I loved to learn their names.”

Adulthood didn’t dampen Rebecca’s fascination, but none of her mentors really encouraged her to pursue insects as a career.

Instead, she began working in the plant nursery industry but she couldn’t shake her dream to work with butterflies.

“One day, I just had to own up to it: I wanted to be a butterfly biologist!”

After years of hard work, and a partnership with RPA, Rebecca’s dream is coming true.

It started with obtaining a Certificate Program in Geographic Information Systems at SUNY Albany and followed with a Masters in Geography at the University of Albany. She reached out to RPA



The results of this past year’s field work are very promising, with 39 of 73 possible butterfly species for Rensselaer County identified in the Community Forest. And the place is flourishing with other wildlife and plants as well. Above, a moment of stillness for an American Copper.

about a location for her thesis research, and the Poestenkill Community Forest was just right. The timing was right for local conservation efforts too, as our partners have been increasingly focused on working with landowners to enhance their lands for butterflies and other pollinators.

Rebecca designed her masters project to evaluate butterfly diversity in different locations within the Poestenkill Community Forest. Her work combined bi-weekly butterfly surveys as well as vegetation surveys enhanced by drone imagery for a fuller picture of insect communities and habitat.

So much life!

“I saw so many butterflies as well as birds, dragonflies, deer, turkeys, partridge, and even a barred owl. I saw the forest change from storms,

and through trails built by volunteers, opening bits of its secrets to visitors,” explained Rebecca, continuing, “I heard frogs calling in the spring, and watched myriad varieties of violets pop up all over the forest locations. I watched the goldenrod sleep, wake up, blossom and fall back to sleep, in the meadow I now call Butterfly Meadow.”

And those butterflies, as well as the diversity of other animals out at the Community Forest, inspired Rebecca just like we hope they will inspire other youth and families in our community.

If you talk to Rebecca, you’ll see her face light up when she thinks about her work this past summer and her dream of working with butterflies come to life, commenting, “I’ll cherish those brief moments I shared with the Community Forest and its inhabitants for the rest of my life.”

It’s amazing, in the winter

Want to volunteer or come out for a hike? We’d love to see you. Sometimes we think winter is a time to hide indoors.

But as Fran Egbert —who leads the work of an outstanding trail crew, courtesy of our partner the Rensselaer Land Trust, notes — “winter is a time to get out and see amazing things.”



Fran’s passion for winter radiates when you ask her why she loves being outside as she explains, “The very best of winter, for me, is an awareness of the tracks of everyone else out there — the ruffed grouse I’d never see in summer. The porcupine, moose, and fisher. Suddenly I can see that the forest is filled with creatures.”

Contact Fran Egbert at fran.egbert@gmail.com or 518-674-3214 if you’d like to volunteer with trails or other projects. And check out our website and free e-News for updates on walks and programs.

You too might find that the evergreens against a blue winter sky, a frost on shrubs, or ice formations along a creek will lift your mood and bring a smile.

Rensselaer Plateau Alliance

Conservation Through Community

PO Box 790
Averill Park, NY 12018
518-712-9221

www.rensselaerplateau.org



The Rensselaer Plateau Alliance works with the community to promote the conservation of clean water and air, undeveloped forests, and other ecologically important areas of the Plateau.

Sign up for our free e-News at www.rensselaerplateaualliance.org

Board of Directors

Rachel Riemann Akera
Jeff Briggs
Fred DeMay, *President*
Jim de Waal Malefyt
Francille Egbert, *Secretary*
David Farren
Richard Gibbs, *Vice President*
Sharon Gibbs
Alice Howard
Lawrence Howard
Walter Kersch, *Treasurer*
Fred McCagg

Board of Advisors

John Bartow
Lisa Hoyt
David Hunt
Chet Opalka
Teri Ptacek
David Sampson
Wesley Slyke
Gary Thomann

Staff

Jim Bonesteel
Annie Jacobs
Dom Gieras
Jaimy George

Front and back cover photos by Nate Simms.

NON-PROFIT
AUTO
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
AVERILL PARK, NY
PERMIT NO. 3

Want to get out on the trails this winter?

Check out the beautiful woodlands and wetlands, close to home. Come join the Rensselaer Land Trust and Rensselaer Plateau Alliance for free, fun, family-friendly, Saturday walks, hikes, and snowshoes in Rensselaer County. It's a great way to spend some time outside and meet new people, too.

December 30 – Grafton Forest, Grafton, 10 am

Enjoy this stunning parcel of over 1,000 acres, which offers some of the best views on the Rensselaer Plateau! 3-5, miles/3-5 hours.

Register: freddemay@nycap.rr.com

January 6 – Petersburg Pass/Berlin Mountain, Taconic Crest Trail, 9 am

A moderate winter hike to the highest NY mountain outside of the Catskills and Adirondacks. 6 miles/4-5 hours. **Register:** jensenmk@gmail.com

January 27 – Albert Family Community Forest, East Nassau, 10 am

Snowshoe or hike the new trails along old stone walls and a large wetland. Get to know your new Community Forest. The trail is steep in places, so please be prepared for slippery rocks. 3-4.5 miles/about 3 hours.

Register: petermapleacres@gmail.com

For regular updates, more hikes, and additional information check out our e-News, Facebook, and website: rensselaerplateau.org. *Hikes require RSVP as they are of varying difficulties, distance, and duration.

