



**2009 ASLA GENERAL DESIGN HONOR AWARD**  
 Teardrop Park, New York, NY  
 Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, Inc. New York, NY

## CHILDREN'S OUTDOOR ENVIRONMENTS NEWSLETTER, WINTER 2010

### Letter from the Chair

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"... Children are disappearing from the outdoors at a rate that would make the top of any conservationist's list of endangered species if they were any other member of the animal kingdom..." [more>>](#)

### Announcement: Invitation to Submit Manuscripts for Journal of Therapeutic Horticulture

The Journal of Therapeutic Horticulture has invited our PPN to submit manuscripts for consideration for publication in the Journal. Manuscripts may [more>>](#)

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[ASLA Home](#)  
[PPN Home](#)

## CONTENTS

[Letter from the Chair](#)

[Kids' Rock!](#)

[Enhancing School Yards to Support Environmental Literacy Through Projects WET, WILD, and Learning Tree](#)

[A Different Kind of Neighborhood Park](#)

[Alhambra Unified School District's Elementary Schools: Taxpayers Invest in Outdoor Spaces to Benefit Children](#)

[Announcement: Invitation to Submit Manuscripts for Journal of Therapeutic Horticulture](#)

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## CHILDREN'S OUTDOOR ENVIRONMENTS NEWSLETTER, WINTER 2010

### Letter from the Chair

by Jena Ponti, ASLA

Spring appears to have come early to Big Sky Country. We've had a surprising number of sunny days with bluebird skies. No doubt we will get several more snows storms but I am already daydreaming about...anything green. It is with a serious case of cabin fever, and great pride, that I announce the release of our PPN's second newsletter.

Our first article is provided with the permission of Karla Christensen, a landscape architect who has spent her professional life designing children's play and learning landscapes overseas and managing international humanitarian aid projects. She has worked in the war-torn and conflict areas of Albania, Kosovo and Bosnia and currently lives and works in Sri Lanka. Her article is an inspiring description of Kids' Rock!, a community-driven park project in Banda Aceh, which was devastated by the tsunami of December 2004. Kids' Rock! was constructed by local hands and with local materials, and is a place where people of all generations can meet, visit, and play.

Laurie Wickencamp, Student ASLA, attended workshops on Project WET, Project WILD, and Project Learning Tree. Laurie shares with us how these projects are used to assess the design of outdoor environments to support environmental learning initiatives. With the passing of the No Child Left Inside Act, landscape architects should become familiar with environmental education programs so that we can help provide schools the settings they need to best foster environmental literacy in our children.

Kay Sales, ASLA, shares two projects designed by her firm, Swire Siegel Landscape Architects. The first of her articles describes how, with the foresight of a long-time property owner, a vacant lot is developed into a dynamic neighborhood park. This park, designed in the "spirit of place," was largely a volunteer effort and provides a variety of play activities and interpretive and educational opportunities.

Kay's second article describes her firm's nature-based philosophy and role as members in a design team tasked with master planning the outdoor spaces for 13 elementary schools in the Alhambra (California) Unified School District.

I'd like to invite more of you to share your experiences, projects, research, and questions with our PPN. We have a passionate group of people in our network and an excellent opportunity to learn from each other. Let's make the most of it!

I hope this newsletter finds you well.

*Jena Ponti, ASLA*

[jena@bruceboody.com](mailto:jena@bruceboody.com)

*Co-Chair, Children's Outdoor Environments PPN*

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[ASLA Home](#)  
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### CONTENTS

[Letter from the Chair](#)

[Kids' Rock!](#)

[Enhancing School Yards to Support Environmental Literacy Through Projects WET, WILD, and Learning Tree](#)

[A Different Kind of Neighborhood Park](#)

[Alhambra Unified School District's Elementary Schools: Taxpayers Invest in Outdoor Spaces to Benefit Children](#)

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### Kids' Rock!

by Karla Christensen



Photo courtesy of Karla Christensen.

Three months to design and contract, and three months to build, "Kids Rock!" is finished! Inspired by Teardrop Park in New York City, Banda Aceh in Indonesia now has a huge hill of boulders smack in the middle of the city. Built on top of a six meter high pyramid of gabions, hundreds of boulders were carefully stabilized one on top of the other to create an entire environment that is aimed at play. Nestled in the boulders are agaves, bamboos and vines, caves, resting areas, and some challenging climbing spaces. The top promises shade inside what we call the "gunongon," which represents the play hill for the wife of the Turkish Sultan who ruled the area four hundred years ago.



Photo courtesy of Karla Christensen.

I designed the space to be multi-generational where all ages can meet, rest under shade, safely play, and have fun. Stairs lead up to the gunongon on the boulder hill, with two slides cascading down into two separate 18" deep sand beds. One sand pit is for the 2-5 years olds and the other is for 5-12 year olds. There are two pumps for the younger children to haul water into the sand to build castles, and also a Komodo dragon and large turtle on which they can play. For those 13 years and up, there is a 3 meter high climbing wall that tempts teenagers to test their strength. And for the adults who are not in the sand or slide with the children, there is a therapy walk with smooth stones for the barefooted, benches surrounding a concrete footpath, and plenty of shade and grass for picnics or relaxing.

[ASLA Home](#)  
[PPN Home](#)

#### CONTENTS

[Letter from the Chair](#)

[Kids' Rock!](#)

[Enhancing School Yards to Support Environmental Literacy Through Projects WET, WILD, and Learning Tree](#)

[A Different Kind of Neighborhood Park](#)

[Alhambra Unified School District's Elementary Schools: Taxpayers Invest in Outdoor Spaces to Benefit Children](#)

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Photo courtesy of Karla Christensen.

Following the Indian Ocean tsunami in December 2004, billions of dollars were sent to the province of Aceh from donors around the world. Roads, schools, hospitals, businesses were among the reconstruction projects. Three years later non-governmental organizations focused on more development and long term projects, which led to the reconstruction of Taman Sari Park. The reconstruction of this park, one of the only parks in Banda Aceh and brutally destroyed by the tsunami, was funded by Catholic Relief Services, with a community center in the middle surrounded by a multi-purpose field. Within the park, 3,200 square meters were left unfinished and completely vacant for over a year. Mercy Corps, for which I worked at the time, subsequently offered to complete it.

The total cost of the project was \$140,000. All materials were locally purchased and fabricated, which not only supported struggling businesses in the area, but guaranteed community ownership and the ability to replace and repair parts when necessary. The fiberglass slides were built on-site over a metal reinforcement bar frame, ferro cement, and six 1mm layers of heavily polished colored fiberglass imbedded into the structure.



Photo courtesy of Karla Christensen.

The large, smooth boulders all came from a nearby quarry. The beautiful coral-colored sand came from a Mercy Corps partner village on the coast, and all plant materials were donated by nurseries within the area. Even the concrete sidewalks have a local touch with imaginative pebble mosaics carefully created by Acehese children. The Mayor of the city was very involved, and of course with his office overlooking the park, he has committed his Parks and Recreation Department to its maintenance for years to come.



Photo courtesy of Karla Christensen.

*Karla Christensen is a landscape architect who designs children's play and learning landscapes overseas and manages international humanitarian aid projects. She has worked in Albania, Kosovo, and Bosnia and currently lives and works in Sri Lanka. She can be reached at: [pelican\\_karla@yahoo.com](mailto:pelican_karla@yahoo.com).*

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## CHILDREN'S OUTDOOR ENVIRONMENTS NEWSLETTER, WINTER 2010

### Enhancing School Yards to Support Environmental Literacy Through Projects WET, WILD, and Learning Tree

by Laurie Wickenkamp, Student ASLA

Environmental literacy doesn't come naturally in most educational settings. Consequently, three highly respected programs known as Project WET (Water Education for Teachers), Project WILD, and Project Learning Tree have been developed to demonstrate environmental concepts to students. This article takes inventory of the outdoor amenities that are needed to support the learning activities outlined in Projects WET, Wild, and Learning Tree.

While these three programs are not new, the need for environmental education has been receiving more attention as people are becoming concerned about "nature deficit disorder," a phrase developed by Richard Louv to describe children who may suffer developmentally due to decreased contact with the natural environment. The first of these three environmental education programs was Project Learning Tree (PLT). PLT was developed by the American Forest Foundation in 1976 to aid educators in teaching environmental education through hands-on activities for students K-12. The main objective of PLT is to present students with complex environmental issues in a non-biased manner so that they "learn how to think, not what to think." PLT was followed by Project WET in 1995 and Project WILD in 2006. These last two were developed from earlier pilot programs and are overseen by the [Council for Environmental Education](#). The curriculum and activities in Projects WET, WILD, and Learning Tree provide opportunities for place-based experiential learning as a foundation for more abstract concepts.

While most of the activities (approximately 350) in the Project WET, WILD, and Learning Tree manuals are designed for the classroom, approximately 23 percent are meant to take place outside on school grounds. Many of the activities could take place on an asphalt playground where observable wildlife and habitat may be reduced to a few bugs, some tough pioneer plant species and an invasive plant or two. However, this sadly pales in comparison to more diverse settings where students can observe the ever-changing sights, sounds, textures, and scents found in nature. With a few enhancements, even the most bereft of school yards can be improved to provide many of the requirements to support outdoor activities for Projects WET, WILD, and Learning Tree. The basic inventory of minimal outdoor requirements described in Projects WET, WILD, and Learning Tree include an open play field, trees, various habitats, and water.

The open play field is used in 17 activities that engage children physically as they enact scenarios that dramatize the cause and effect of natural events that take place in ecosystems. The ideal open play area is flat turf that is free of obstructions, but if this is not available, the activities can take place on a paved surface. With the addition of a potable water source, the playfield can support two additional activities that demonstrate irrigation and water contamination. The size of the open play field is highly adaptable and can vary according to the number of participants and the amount of physical energy to be expended. If there is a large number of students with abundant energy, the play area can be increased in size to allow them to move more freely. If there are smaller numbers of students or those with less physical capacity, then the size of the play area can be decreased. In addition to the play field, an obstruction-free grassy hill can be used for a physical activity that demonstrates the relationship between plant cover, water runoff, and erosion.

Trees are specifically mentioned in 21 activities. Of these activities, seven could conceivably be undertaken with a single deciduous tree. These activities include measuring size, observing seasonal changes, structure, tree health, and transpiration, as well as observable wildlife that uses the tree. One of the activities in PLT requires seven to ten native trees so that students can use field guides in observing buds, flowers, twigs, leaves, and seeds. With the addition of these native trees, the number of associated activities increases significantly. Students are able to contrast and compare colors, forms, and textures. Native trees also will form a more complex habitat, which in turn attracts more wildlife. In addition, fallen logs demonstrate the process of decay and the need for decomposers, and provide shelter for wildlife. In some instances it may be possible to measure area grid sections to allow for the study

[ASLA Home](#)  
[PPN Home](#)

#### CONTENTS

[Letter from the Chair](#)

[Kids' Rock!](#)

[Enhancing School Yards to Support Environmental Literacy Through Projects WET, WILD, and Learning Tree](#)

[A Different Kind of Neighborhood Park](#)

[Alhambra Unified School District's Elementary Schools: Taxpayers Invest in Outdoor Spaces to Benefit Children](#)

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of the succession of native plant species and non-native invasive plants, which further supports activities and concepts presented in Projects WET, WILD and Learning Tree. While native trees form the foundation of the school yard habitat, fruiting trees, ornamental flowering plants, herbs, and native perennials may also be added to increase butterflies and beneficial insects as well as hummingbird activity.

Trees provide food and shelter for many species, but the addition of a permanent water source supports even greater diversity, such as aquatic plants, fish, amphibians, birds, reptiles, and mammals. These, in turn, will support activities such as monitoring water quality, discovering animal tracks and nests, and listening to birds songs, as evidence of species diversity. In addition to activities that involve a permanent water source such as a pond or stream, there are also several activities that observe the ephemeral water found in puddles. Humble puddles could be expanded to include bio-swales and rain gardens. The relatively simple combination of a grassy play field and native trees and water provide various habitats for wildlife and provide for approximately 40 more activities described in Project WET, WILD and Learning Tree. If all of the recommendations are implemented, the school yard could support nearly all of the outdoor learning activities (approximately 80) described in these projects.

*Laurie Wickenkamp, Student ASLA, is in the MLA program at the University of Oklahoma where she is specializing in children's outdoor environments. She has completed training to be certified to use the educational materials from Projects WET, WILD and Learning Tree. She may be contacted at: [Laurie.L.Wickenkamp-1@ou.edu](mailto:Laurie.L.Wickenkamp-1@ou.edu).*

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## CHILDREN'S OUTDOOR ENVIRONMENTS NEWSLETTER, WINTER 2010

### A Different Kind of Neighborhood Park

by Kay Sales, ASLA

In most Los Angeles area communities, it is rare to find neighborhood parks that offer unstructured play opportunities for children, passive recreation for all ages, and are within walking distance of their homes. In the Trust for Public Land's recent publication "[City Parks Facts 2009 Report](#)," Los Angeles scored very poorly with only one park playground per 10,000 residents. In a 2008 article in the LA Weekly Magazine, author Matthew Fleisher observed, "After generations of speculative real estate booms, L.A. has the smallest percentage of space devoted to parks in any major American city; a paltry 4 percent; most of it in the rough Santa Monica Mountains." (See: [Why L.A. is Park Poor](#).)

As our cities become more congested with endless suburban development, do we truly appreciate the full impact on children? Many of the vacant lots of our youth have disappeared. With no parks nearby where do the children play?

However, in the city of Sierra Madre, a town in Los Angeles County, children continue to play on the open lots at the corner of Sunnyside and Ramona on which kids have played for decades. These vacant lots belonged to Milton and Harriet Goldberg. Despite many lucrative offers over the years, the Goldbergs refused to sell the lots, believing that being outdoors was essential to children's healthy development. According to Milton, "Children need space, time, and love." So, for 60 years, he watched children play on his park-like property and after his death his heirs wanted to see the land become park space. The City of Sierra Madre, which has a long history of dedication to protecting and preserving open space, purchased the property through creative land acquisition and funding strategies.

Ronnie Siegel, ASLA, principal of Swire Siegel Landscape Architects, and Roberta Goldberg, Milton and Harriet's daughter, both attended the World Forum on Nature Education in 2006. While there, they came up with the idea of designing a different kind of neighborhood park on the Goldbergs' land. Working with Roberta, who is a child psychologist, Ronnie designed a park that incorporates a unique hands-on creative play environment for children. Using solely California native plants and local materials, they designed a space that also provides a passive recreation area for neighborhood residents of all ages.

The development of the Milton and Harriet Goldberg Recreation Area was funded through local community fund raising and a matching grant from the Land and Water Conservation Fund. More than 100 volunteers and City staff worked together to prepare for Sierra Madre's first new park in more than 30 years. The community event took place over the Earth Day Celebration weekend last year; volunteers, ranging from 2 to 80 years in age, planted more than 200 plants and trees. Local residents, community groups, and city staff were joined by Goldberg family members.



Photo courtesy of Ronnie Siegel, ASLA

The park consists of two contrasting spaces at its opposite ends. The north side of the site is a sunny area with soft textured grasses and plants that move in the wind. In the center is a circle of desert willows that are being trained to form a living replica of a Gabriello/Tongva Indian hut. The hut's seating is a semi-circle of recycled wood

[ASLA Home](#)  
[PPN Home](#)

#### CONTENTS

[Letter from the Chair](#)

[Kids' Rock!](#)

[Enhancing School Yards to Support Environmental Literacy Through Projects WET, WILD, and Learning Tree](#)

[A Different Kind of Neighborhood Park](#)

[Alhambra Unified School District's Elementary Schools: Taxpayers Invest in Outdoor Spaces to Benefit Children](#)

[Announcement: Invitation to Submit Manuscripts for Journal of Therapeutic Horticulture](#)

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stumps, and the paving is made from wood sections and shredded bark.



Photo courtesy of Ronnie Siegel, ASLA

The south side of the park is shaded by native oaks with a leathery leaf understory of native plants that form an oak woodland. A deep sand filled basin recharges storm water and functions as a sand play area for children. The area's paving is made of local stone. Carved granite boulders form benches, and there are additional boulders in a dry stream bed. Stone basins catch rainwater to attract wildlife.



Photo courtesy of Ronnie Siegel, ASLA

Three paths connect the Oak Woodland to the Living Tree Shelter. One is planted with fragrant native plants, another with a variety of year-long flowering plants, and the last with wildflowers. The plants have been chosen for their properties to provide food for birds and butterflies, to offer fragrance and color, and to provide examples of plants used by the indigenous people of the region.



Photo courtesy of Ronnie Siegel, ASLA

The City of Sierra Madre's website provides a native plant guide with brief descriptions of each plant in the park and their benefits to local wildlife. Once all the plants are labeled, visitors will be able to identify and understand their role in nature.

Community involvement has been and will continue to be of great importance to the success of this park. The ongoing maintenance is overseen by local non-profit groups, schools, and interested neighbors.

If only every community were lucky enough to be blessed with their own Goldberg family! Milton, and through his example, his children, not only understood the importance of children needing outdoor natural spaces for unstructured play, but also made it a reality.

*Kay Sales, ASLA, is an Associate at Swire Siegel Landscape Architects, La Canada, California and can be reached at: [kaysales@earthlink.net](mailto:kaysales@earthlink.net)*

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## CHILDREN'S OUTDOOR ENVIRONMENTS NEWSLETTER, WINTER 2010

### Alhambra Unified School District's Elementary Schools: Taxpayers Invest in Outdoor Spaces to Benefit Children

by Kay Sales, ASLA

"...[C]hildren are disappearing from the outdoors at a rate that would make the top of any conservationist's list of endangered species if they were any other member of the animal kingdom...." Tim Gill (2005)<sup>1</sup>

According to a report published in *The New England Journal of Medicine*,<sup>2</sup> for the first time in two centuries, the current generation of children in America may have shorter life expectancies than their parents. The rapid rise in childhood obesity, if left unchecked, could shorten life spans by as much as five years. How can we as landscape architects help the next generation? Should our profession be doing more by actively creating spaces for children to go outside and play, get involved in sports, and experience nature?

One school district in Southern California decided that updating their schoolyards was long overdue. Last year, the residents of the Alhambra Unified School District (AUSD) approved a \$50 million bond to modernize and update each of the 13 elementary schools in the district. While every school had different requirements, the one overriding concern was the poor outdoor spaces. Each school had inadequate kindergarden playgrounds with outdated or no climbing structures, poor sports facilities, asphalt as far as the eye could see, and no shade. The excellent Southern California weather and the large outdoor spaces meant that there were untapped opportunities for getting children outside and active.



Brightwood Elementary School. Photo courtesy of Ronnie Siegel, ASLA

The school district charged Swire Siegel Landscape Architects, in collaboration with Elemental Landscapes, with developing and designing master plans for each site. Ronnie Siegel, ASLA, the principal of the firm, has a special interest in designing for children and feels that immersing them in nature encourages children's natural creativity and curiosity, and promotes physical fitness and health while at the same time strengthening their innate bonds with the natural world.

Swire Siegel and the architecture firm, ML Architecture, developed a mission statement for the master plans stating that "[f]or a diverse group of children with varying interests, designs that promote a variety of experiences in a safe environment will increase learning and decrease boredom and conflict."

Once the stakeholders (teachers, children and parents) identified common issues and interests, the design team worked with the school district to define the existing problems and then assess the opportunities, benefits, and elements needed for success.

Enrollment at each school can range from 700 to 1,000 children, so it was of paramount importance to create landscapes with a rich diversity of learning and play opportunities for large numbers of children. By supporting a wider variety of student

[ASLA Home](#)  
[PPN Home](#)

#### CONTENTS

[Letter from the Chair](#)

[Kids' Rock!](#)

[Enhancing School Yards to Support Environmental Literacy Through Projects WET, WILD, and Learning Tree](#)

[A Different Kind of Neighborhood Park](#)

[Alhambra Unified School District's Elementary Schools: Taxpayers Invest in Outdoor Spaces to Benefit Children](#)

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interests and abilities, children naturally become more physically active. While the schools required new sports courts for their physical education programs, not all children want to spend their recess time playing competitive sports. Therefore, it was important to design natural areas where children could still jump, climb, dig, build, role-play, and generally get moving in ways that nurture all aspects of their health and development.

To foster a connection with the natural world and make children aware of their regional environment, native plant gardens were important elements in the master plan, and these spaces were integrated in and around the school yards. They provide nature learning opportunities and restful, sensory environments in which children can gather and socialize.

The AUSD is a member of the [Network for a Healthy California](#), a Los Angeles Unified School District movement which is part of a statewide movement of local, state, and national partners that are collectively working toward improving the health status of low-income Californians through increased fruit and vegetable consumption and daily physical activity. The school campuses will include vegetable gardens, have enough space for a class to gather, and are intended to be widely used by all grades when implemented. Through education, children can begin to make more informed dietary choices, understand where food comes from, and develop relationships with community organizations or non-profits for help with the gardens.

Many staff requested class and grade size gathering spaces so outdoor projects could then become an important part of the curriculum. Studies have shown that these spaces and projects improve academic performance, increase enthusiasm for teaching, and reduce discipline and classroom management problems.<sup>3</sup>



Brightwood Elementary School Master Plan. Photo courtesy of Ronnie Siegel, ASLA

Rethinking existing bleak kindergarten yards created an opportunity to design spaces that supported small and large motor development and cognitive development, promoted problem solving and creativity, and fostered a connection with the natural world. The challenge was to make better use of the space by organizing a greater variety of activities to prevent conflicts and provide more safety and easier supervision.

According to the [Great Schools Web site](#), AUSD currently has a district rating of 7 out of a possible high of 10, based on test results. A recent study in Australia<sup>4</sup> explored research that established credible grounds for doctors to "prescribe" contact with nature for various diseases, and for parks to be considered a national health resource. Among the findings is that children with a greener playground had better attention scores in the classroom after playing outside.

The question is how the greening the Alhambra school grounds will affect the children's attention scores, and ultimately the schools' district ratings. It will be very interesting to see. Watch this space!

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#### End notes:

<sup>1</sup> Gill, Tim. "Let Our Children Roam Free." [The Ecologist](#), September 23, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Olshansky, et al. "The Potential Decline in Life Expectancy in the United States in the 21st Century," [The New England Journal of Medicine](#), March 17, 2005, Volume 352: 1138-1145 No. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Raffan, James, "[Nature Nurtures: Investigating the Potential of School Grounds](#)," 2000.



<sup>4</sup> O'Connor, Thea, "Australians Study Nature-Deficit Disorder." Sydney Morning Herald, May 21, 2008.

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## CHILDREN'S OUTDOOR ENVIRONMENTS NEWSLETTER, WINTER 2010

### Announcement: Invitation to Submit Manuscripts for Journal of Therapeutic Horticulture

by Jena Ponti, ASLA

The *Journal of Therapeutic Horticulture* has invited our PPN to submit manuscripts for consideration for publication in the Journal. Manuscripts may include research projects, case studies, program and services descriptions, therapeutic practice descriptions, therapeutic horticulture philosophies, therapeutic design project descriptions, relevant book reviews, and other related topics.

The Call for Papers has been posted on our e-Network under Documents & Resources.

You may also contact Jena Ponti at: [jena@bruceboody.com](mailto:jena@bruceboody.com) for further information.

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[PPN Home](#)

#### CONTENTS

[Letter from the Chair](#)

[Kids' Rock!](#)

[Enhancing School Yards to Support Environmental Literacy Through Projects WET, WILD, and Learning Tree](#)

[A Different Kind of Neighborhood Park](#)

[Alhambra Unified School District's Elementary Schools: Taxpayers Invest in Outdoor Spaces to Benefit Children](#)

[Announcement: Invitation to Submit Manuscripts for Journal of Therapeutic Horticulture](#)

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