

Environmental Ambassadors in Training

By Olivia M. Hall

In August, Amy Zhong made a pledge. She vowed not to drink out of plastic water bottles for one year. "Before, I would buy a plastic bottle of water every day at school, and then I would drink it and recycle the bottle," she says. "That was really bad of me. So this year I got my own water bottle, and I haven't drunk any water from a plastic bottle since."

The Ithaca High School junior came to this conviction as one of six participants in last year's pilot run of PEEPS, the Plantations Environmental Education Program for Sustainability. Led by Donna Levy, education outreach coordinator at Cornell Plantations, this outdoor, hands-on apprenticeship for teens is now accepting applications from students in grades eight to 10 who want to gain appreciation for the natural world and learn how to be environmental ambassadors to their communities.

Participants spend after-school and weekend sessions in the spring and fall, as well as six full-time weeks in the summer, digging, planting, exploring, discussing, hiking, teaching, and simply having a good time. At the heart of these activities lies the Sustainable Backyard Demonstration Garden in the Plantations. The first year's crop of students created the garden's beds, while this year's members will do more planting. "Last year I wanted them to get a taste for gardening, and they actually ended up asking for more," says Levy.

The daily hour or two of gardening is one way participants delve into nature. "The backyard can be a



Photo Olivia Hall

PEEPS coordinator Donna Levy, left, and participant Amy Zhong with models built last year by students in the program.

metaphor for how one lives one's life," Levy explains. "It is a place where, in addition to learning skills and having fun gardening, we explore environmental issues as they relate to our lives, our community and larger global issues." This year, for example, corn will be not only a garden crop but also at the center of discussions on sustainability, food sovereignty, plant breeding, biofuels and nutrition.

Once a week, the group takes "Mile Away" hikes out into the field to study plants and the environment, often with the help of Cornell faculty and staff. "We went on a lot of interesting field trips," Zhong recalls of last year's excursions. "We went to see the insect collection at Cornell, and one professor talked to us about dirt." With a laugh, she self-corrects: "I mean

soil. That's what we learned to call it. And I also learned a lot of plant names." On the Floating Classroom, the group studied Cayuga Lake's hydrilla issues, Levy adds.

Many of the program's activities are designed to benefit the wider community. As citizen scientists, says Levy, this year participants will collect data that will be used by climate scientists. During last year's "food pool," the students created five stations at the Plantations where people could bring surplus produce from their home gardens. The group then collected the bounty and, along with harvest from the Sustainable Backyard, donated it to Loaves and Fishes.

Ultimately, Levy hopes that PEEPS graduates will emerge as leaders on environmental issues. This is what initially drew Zhong to

the program. "I was really aware that the planet that we live on is going down pretty quickly," she says, "so I wanted to learn anything I could to help it and how to reach out to people and get them motivated to stop being wasteful and not caring about the environment. And I thought this program would be perfect for that."

Grouped by age into three tiers, participants practice their outreach skills twice a week during their apprenticeship. Green Partners, the youngest, help with children's programs at the Ithaca Children's Garden, while the slightly older Garden Apprentices work with Plantations gardeners. Finally, the Environmental Ambassadors contribute weekly to the Plantations newsletter and make university research on sustainability accessible to the public through interpretation on signs and in person.

"What lends itself to teaching the leadership role is the structure of the program, because we're asking kids to come back," Levy explains. "We try to keep kids for two to four years." Zhong, for one, hopes to return this year. "PEEPS has entirely changed my view of the natural world, and I would love to return to learn some more," she says. "It was a really interesting and fun program. I really liked it."

Her promise not to drink from disposable plastic water bottles is evidence of the long-term impact that PEEPS can have. Challenged to come up with a pledge to change their behavior for the next year, other participants decided to take shorter showers or only buy food

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Road

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Titus Towers and another public housing complex on South Plain and Center streets. She says the IHA invested \$500,000 in flood mitigation efforts at the Titus Towers property to ensure the safety of its 250 residents, many of whom are physically disabled. Massive flooding in September 2011 threatened both IHA properties with evacuation.

"Now the city is going ahead with a project that can potentially drown a sizable portion of the Titus Flats area," she says. "And this is being done without any independent site review or environmental study."

This point was echoed by Jules Ravo, an Ithaca attorney who is assisting some of the property owners. He questions how a project of this size not only escaped independent review but is moving toward approval with only 25 percent of its preliminary designs in place, and yet property owners have already been billed for estimated costs.

Ravo also asked how the BPW could tacitly approve a project that seems in violation of the city's code, and he referenced Chapter 282-2 in the city charter that covers storm-water management and erosion and sediment control. This section lists 12 minimum storm-water management requirements and controls for construction projects "to protect, maintain and enhance the health, safety and general welfare of the citizens of the City and its natural environment."

Two points under Section 282-2 call for "established procedures for the submission, review, approval or disapproval of storm-water management plans, for the inspection of approved active development projects, and for long-term follow-up"; and it calls for "provisions for enforcement and penalties for non-compliance with these storm-water regulations."

From the outset, the BPW listed the Old Elmira Road reconstruction as a "Project II" undertaking, akin to only repaving and rehabilitating a roadway in a flood zone with a history of drainage problems. The public can comment on that code, among other points, at a public meeting on Feb. 25, when the BPW is expected to approve the project.

Gun Control

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impact New York State taxpayers. Lifton said that the governor has \$37 million dollars in the budget for the legislation, and that "all of us

will pay a little bit to get it set up," a statement that was met with audience observations about the irony of citizens having to finance a law they object to on principle.

Not everyone in the town opposes Lifton's views. Ulysses resident Bob Howarth commended Lifton for standing by her positions. Elizabeth Root of Trumansburg, 76, said she lives alone but the only protection she needs is her dogs.

The final audience comment came from a man who identified himself as being from a long line of military men. Currently he, his wife and children all enjoy sport-shooting together. His contends that government leaders want a state with high taxes, that's free of guns and has no middle class. "I can deal with New York being a welfare state, but these gun laws are pushing me over the top," he said.

Lifton admitted she's no expert on guns, but added, "I'm happy to learn more about them." Bill McGuire, owner of Interlaken Guns & Ammo, quickly took her up on this, presenting her with a business card and offering to take her to a gun club.

Assemblywoman Lifton can be reached at 277-8030. Learn more about SAFE at <http://www.governor.ny.gov/2013/gun-reforms>.

Ambassadors

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that comes from within a 500-mile radius of Ithaca.

"One participant said she'd think several times before purchasing anything," says Levy. "The interesting thing was that her dad ended up buying her an eco-friendly computer case because of her challenge. So it went to the next level, where someone else was affected by the changes."

The PEEPS application deadline is March 1. Applications are available at www.cornellplantations.org/learning/teen.education/peeps/online.application. For more information, contact Donna Levy at 254-7259.

Town

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roads that historically are supposed to last 15 years or so. Roads are a public benefit, allowing us to get from place to place, allowing farmers to deliver their produce and allowing delivery trucks to get to our houses and to the stores where we shop. Supporting that historical baseline traffic is important and appropriate.

"The goal is to prevent any single user or project that is significantly

in excess of the historical baseline from 'cheating' the taxpayers out of the full road lifetime that they have paid for. That does not mean that the traffic will not be allowed, but it does mean that heavy users should provide money or repairs commensurate with the damage caused to compensate taxpayers," he adds.

Landscapes

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infiltration trenches and green roofs.

Manning would like to see more native plants incorporated into public landscapes, such as the shoreline of Stewart Park. These sites need new plantings, he says, and natives offer better erosion control as well as food for the birds.

For detailed conference information and to register, visit www.ithacanativelandscape.com.

Dance

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president of the Trumansburg Conservatory.

"I came out of a studio background, where we spent all day looking at ourselves in a mirror, and entered into an environment where there were no mirrors. [Folk Dance] was all about interpersonal relationships and getting back to why people started dancing in the first place," says Nancy. While teaching at SUNY Cortland, the Cortland Performing Arts Institute, TCFA and the Leslie School of Dance in Watkins Glen, Kane leads students in studies of Irish dance, ballet, tap, jazz and musical theater.

Admission to the weekend is \$40, or \$20 for students. Admission for single events, such as Friday's concert, a Saturday class or the evening dance, is \$10, or \$5 for students.

On April 6, from 8 to 11 p.m., TCFA is hosting a contra dance with the O'Shanigans, called by Casey Carr. For more information, go to www.tburgconservatory.org.

Blind Spots

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great producer too. We all feel very lucky to have him on board, and the band is gelling now like never before."

Walsh not only possesses a great voice, she has her own style. And often those two things don't come together in a single package. A great example of this is the Blind Spots' cover of Pink Floyd's "On The Turning Away." Her voice is so

incredibly powerful during this song, it was transformed into something that took the song in a new direction, at the same time honoring the original.

"That was the toughest Floyd tune of the three we learned for that benefit," she says. "It's an incredibly powerful song, so it was important that we spend the time trying to do it justice."

The Blind Spots are, of course, a band. And a hard working one at that. "One thing this band certainly has going for it is a strong work ethic. We spend a lot of time together in the rehearsal room," Walsh says.

Along with the work ethic is the songwriting process. "I write all the lyrics, except for a few chorus lines from Suave here and there—he's very good at finding those simple, resonant lines, where I often get too wordy and convoluted," says Walsh. "Suave and I often come to the band with a song that's 70 percent or so finished, and it comes to life once we're all in the room together. And then there are times that we write right in the room with everyone, which is an invigorating process, albeit slower. Writing with five creative people can be tough, but some of our favorite tunes have been born that way. We all have very different musical backgrounds and tastes, so what we bring to the table comes together in a unique way."

As performers, the Blind Spots really go all out—no matter the venue. "Live shows are the most fun part of my life, and I want the people who show up to feel that and be glad they came," Walsh says. "We give it everything. If it felt disingenuous, I wouldn't bother doing it. It's one of the best natural highs out there."

And anyone who has seen the band play might have noticed Maddy's great style—which more often than not features some amazing boots.

"Ha! Really, I get to talk about my boots? Almost all of my attire was acquired secondhand, and I've altered most of it," says Walsh. "My sewing machine doesn't get a chance to collect dust. The band has been sporting all white for a while, so I recently bought a pair of brown ankle boots at the Salvo and covered them with tiny squares of white duct tape. I have an embarrassing number of boots, and I'm always collecting. They make you feel way more like a superhero (and way more stable) on stage than stilettos, that's for sure."

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