



Kelsi Clark

Wants Everyone to Get Outside

A family hike through the Vischer Ferry Nature and Historic Preserve.

COVER STORY

By Jenna Caputo
Photos by MarkBolles.com

“Appreciating the outdoors and the natural world around us has been something that has stuck with me since the first time I went hiking,” says Kelsi Clark. “I hiked Mount Marcy with boots I borrowed from my sister and I remember sitting at the top and being overwhelmed and in awe of the beauty and the experience, looking out at nothing but green and blue. Never before had I been moved by something so much, and a little bit of that moment of awe has stayed with me. For me, there is nothing like helping others to “see” the natural world around us for how amazing it really is. My hope is that the appreciation for nature translates into action to care for it.” Kelsi has been caring for nature ever since.

Growing up in Lisbon, NY, she enjoyed reading, participating in organized sports, running, hiking the Adirondacks and being outside in general. She attended Hamilton College with a major in biology, where she participated in a field-based study abroad program in

Australia to study both the natural history of Australia and the history of the Aboriginal people there. She spent much of her time in the tropical rainforest and on the Great Barrier Reef.

The day before her 20th birthday, her group was planting trees at a cultural center and found a Witchetty Grub in the soil. These grubs are a traditional food for many of the Aboriginal groups in Australia. “Our group leader dared someone to eat it, so I did to usher in a new decade. Honestly, it was really gross! It tasted like motor oil, or what I would assume motor oil tastes like,” she remembers.

Returning to the U.S. after this life-changing experience, she decided to transfer schools and instead pursue environmental science at the University of Vermont, then completing her Master’s degree in Environmental and Forest Biology, at SUNY_ESF in Syracuse, completing the National History Interpretation program. Initially, she took a position as an environmental consultant with a firm in Malta. She enjoyed the fieldwork aspect of the job, but knew that sitting at a desk in a cubicle was not a long-term



I go to nature to be soothed and healed, and to have my senses put in tune once more.

—John Burroughs

solution for her. She decided to go back to grad school again, this time to pursue a teaching certification in biology from Saint Rose.

She took a teaching job here in Shen before her husband, Brian, was offered a position with the Treasury Department as a Financial Economist in Washington DC. They moved to Lorton, VA where she received another teaching job and volunteered her time at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History, working in the insect zoo and the butterfly pavilion.

While in Virginia, she had the opportunity to hear Jane Goodall, a British primatologist, ethologist, anthropologist and UN Messenger of Peace, speak at the Richmond Forum. Goodall spoke about her work with the Gombe chimpanzees, the threats facing the planet and why she still had hope despite all of the challenges facing our natural world. Through a student connection, Kelsi was able to go backstage to speak with Goodall in person. “She hugged me and it was one of the most powerful moments of my life,” Kelsi reminisces. “Her talk and her books have greatly influenced my outlook on the world. I keep the photo of us together in our living room as a reminder to take action and have hope.”

Once they started their family, Kelsi and Brian decided to make some changes. She stopped teaching to stay home with their children and Brian took a more family-friendly job as an Assistant Professor of Finance at RPI. After moving

back to Clifton Park, Kelsi found herself with a 2 ½ year old, a 6 month old and “a serious itch to get all of us outside!” She had recently read Richard Louv’s book, *Last Child in the Woods*, and was really inspired. The book is essentially about “Nature Deficit Disorder” – the idea that children and society in general are spending very little time outdoors.

Kelsi explains, “The benefits of free play in a natural environment are difficult to quantify and impossible to test in a classroom, so it is the first thing to be cut from a school’s curriculum or municipality’s budget. As we have less and less contact with our natural world, studies have shown that it negatively impacts our health and well-being. One section of the book describes a nature educator who believed people are unlikely to value what they cannot name. This really resonated with me. If children don’t know the names of trees or the flowers or the birds or insects, or know they exist, how can they possibly care about them? In short, the book inspired me to think maybe I could get others to care about Mother Nature. I’m convinced she sorely needs our attention and we need her just as much.”

Kelsi wanted to reunite children with nature and their surroundings, so she started community Parent & Me hikes.

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"I thought organized hikes would be a great way to commit to getting the kids some fresh air, meet other caregivers and their little ones and introduce people to the great open spaces that our town has to offer."

Through the support of the Open Space Department and the members of the Town Rec Department, Kelsi was able to organize hikes that are short enough for children (or parents carrying children) and are set at a "move at your own pace" format. The hikes run every Wednesday at 9:30am for a 6-week session starting in March.

Kelsi is excited by the reaction to the program. "At almost every hike, we have had at least one parent/child pair who has never been to the venue before. It's really neat to see tiny kids running and playing on trails, getting muddy and touching nature, and parents relaxing a bit and enjoying where we live."

Kelsi also offers other programs to the community, including Nature Tots – lessons based on Project Wild's "Growing Up Wild" curriculum and a second series of hikes this April and May that focus on the Town's Passport to Nature Program. Through this program, families can pick up their passport booklets at the Town Hall, then find the hidden letterboxes located around eight town properties. At each letterbox, they can stamp their passports and record their observations along the way. Once all eight stamps are completed, families can bring their booklet back to the Parks, Recreation and Community Affairs Office to

receive their commemorative pin. Additional letterboxes are in the works and should hopefully be up soon.

Kelsi feels that in addition to appreciating and protecting our environment, it's also very important to focus on the future generation and their impact on the world. She and Brian now have three children: Clara (4 ½), Harrison (2 ½), Walter (9 mths) and their dog, Darwin (8), who also happened to be ring bearer at their wedding. "Growing our family has been the most challenging and rewarding thing I have ever done," Kelsi says. "I feel strongly that our job as parents is to try and raise little human beings who believe they can make the world a better place and have the motivation to do so. I'm still in the throws of figuring out how to accomplish this goal, but I should have more feedback in 20 or 30 years."

In the meantime, she is still getting out there and having adventures in nature. A couple of years ago, she traveled with Brian to a conference in Iceland, where she got to walk on a glacier and see the black sand beaches as well as many waterfalls and geysers. She joined an adventure tour company for a day trip hike on the Solheim Glacier. "It was very powerful to hear how much the ice sheet has retreated in the last few years," she observes. "The location we visited was part of the documentary, *Chasing Ice*, in which photos were taken every day for several years on glaciers around the world. They were time-lapsed to show the dramatic ice loss. The whole trip was very eye-opening."

Kelsi knows first hand the rewards of being outside and she encourages everyone to find new ways to get the family out and interacting with nature. Not sure where to go? Kelsi suggests checking out the Clifton Park Open Space Program and Friends of Clifton Park Open Space websites as a starting point. "Our area offers so much in terms of nature and open space, you just have to look for it," she says. It doesn't matter where you start, her #1 piece of advice is to just "get outside!" ■

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