



Photo by Amy Lynn Schreck

# Kathe Crowley Conn:

## Ensuring Mother Nature's future, one kid at a time

By Amanda N. Wegner

The view from Kathe Crowley Conn's office window is fabulous.

And a bit juxtaposed. As president and executive director of the Aldo Leopold Nature Center, from her desk she can see children bobbing and weaving along interpretive trails, traversing prairies, woodlands and wetlands. Look off in the distance, however, and you're reminded of just what a diamond in the rough the area is, as commercial buildings dot the horizon.

"That's part of the charm of this place. It's a premier urban nature development, yet we're surrounded by development," says Crowley Conn. "But once you get back here and you're a little kid walking around in the tall grass, it's wilderness."

### Young scientists

Crowley Conn was recruited to help start ALNC, whose mission is based on the work of namesake and Wisconsin native son Aldo Leopold, back in 1995. She came to the Monona nature center from the Chicago Academy of Sciences, which has a long history of using the environment and ecology to teach science.

Growing up, Crowley Conn notes that she didn't have formal science, but she did have plenty of informal education in the Chicagoland back lots.

"I remember when I was 10, 11 years old, we rode our bikes everywhere. We'd ride our bikes through this field, and it spurred in me a real interest in observing nature. I got my little buddies together and we'd watch grasshoppers, categorize them, study them, look at where they were living, form some hypotheses. I found out years later that's all scientist stuff, but as a kid that's a real natural thing to do."

It wasn't until her later years in college, when she needed an additional science course, that the interest took off.

It just goes to show, adds Crowley Conn, that "you can find nature anywhere, even in an abandoned lot."

Or in the 94 acres and trails, spanning three natural areas and the Madison-Monona boundary line, that comprise ALNC, and all surrounded by the hustle and bustle of city life.

"Just as human beings need to connect with other human beings, we need to have that connection to the land," she says. And ALNC provides that connection.

### Developmentally critical

There's no dispute that children are not getting enough nature in this digital age of email and video games. There is even a term for the younger generation's lack of nature experience, "nature deficit disorder," dubbed by Richard Louv in his 2005 book, *Last Child in the Woods*.

"The reason I choose this path is because [environmental education is] so critical to a healthy childhood and development." But Crowley Conn says ALNC spends as much time connecting adults with nature as they do children. "We're teaching parents as well as kids."

But learning about nature isn't about having special skills or knowledge. It is something inherent in all of us, says Crowley Conn, regardless of age. Throw in a dash of curiosity and anyone can connect with nature.

What keeps many adults from enjoying the great outdoors with youngsters is fear of the child's curiosity. What if they ask a question you can't answer? Do you make it up, pretend to be all-knowing? Ignore the question? Reframe it to give an answer to something you do know?

"You can use time in nature as an opportunity to further your own learning," says Crowley Conn. "Feed off their enthusiasm and inquiry. Be scientists and explorers together. If you don't know the answer, find it. Go to the library. Find an expert. Google it."

continued on next page

# Au naturel

Ways for adults to get children interacting with nature:

- Open the door and let the kids run out! Don't think you need a plan, schedule or special place to enjoy and learn about nature.
- Be a role model. You don't need to have the answers, but you do need the willingness to encourage children to get out, be it walking on a trail, sitting under the stars or playing in the garden.
- It's not so much the ability to answer the child's questions but the ability to *ask* the questions. Foster a sense of discovery, and turn outings into adventures. Let time outdoors be on the child's agenda, not your teaching agenda.
- Take the legwork out of your next adventure. ALNC's Monona trails are open to the public weekdays 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., or sign up for Nature Net News at [www.naturenet.com/earth-alive/nnhome.asp](http://www.naturenet.com/earth-alive/nnhome.asp). Call the center at 221-0404.



Photo by Amy Lynn Scherack

## Finding facts

Crowley Conn went on her own fact-finding mission when she first came to ALNC. Walking the trails with Nina Leopold Bradley, Aldo Leopold's daughter, Crowley Conn would ask "What would your dad have said here? Noticed here?"

"I was very honored to have that connection and mentoring," adds Crowley Conn.

ALNC takes Leopold's philosophy seriously. It's not just teaching about nature, but to "... teach the student to see the land, to understand what he sees and enjoy what he understands," as Leopold once said.

That same quote serves as the basis for ALNC's mission statement. Crowley Conn says she gets "to see, every day, that we are connecting kids to nature," and ALNC has

two sites to help students of different ages achieve that.

The Monona campus, tucked away at 300 Femrite Drive on the Madison-Monona border, is complete with rolling terrain and easy interpretive trails, perfect for younger students and those physically challenged. It also includes a Children's Shack, a historically accurate, child-scaled replica of Aldo Leopold's famous retreat to teach children how to live simply and lightly on the land, as well as the Nature Center, one of Wisconsin's first green-built buildings.

Open by appointment only, a 38-acre wooded site in Black Earth is geared toward older students. Its rugged terrain and hiking trails traverse hills, valleys and rocky outcroppings. In Black Earth, older students

learn about restoration ecology and are actually helping to restore natural sites there.

The two sites are another juxtaposition of sorts, pitting the Monona campus' glaciated terrain against Black Earth's untouched, unglaciated landscape. But rugged terrain or rolling, remote or in an urban backyard, "Nature is always there," says Crowley Conn, "and serves as a big outdoor learning laboratory. You just have to take advantage of it."



*Editor and freelance writer Amanda Wegner enjoys taking her two-year-old out on backyard adventures and searching for "critters."*