

Growing Together:

West Side Collaborative for Youth and Nature

A project of The Christopher Family Foundation



Jardincito Nature Play Garden. Photo courtesy of NeighborSpace.



Table of Contents

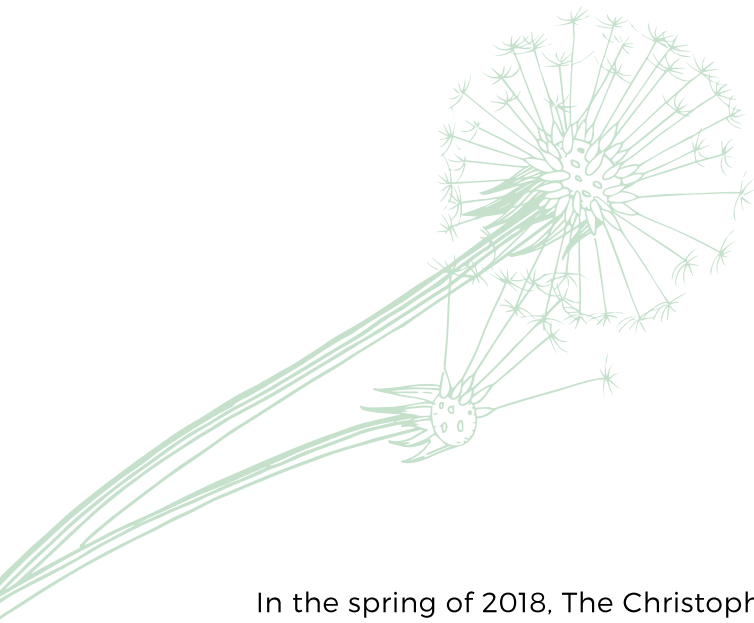


3	INTRODUCTION
4	FRAMEWORK
6	EXPLORING
9	CONNECTING
10	PLANNING GRANTS
11	LIVE PITCH
14	SELECTING A FINALIST

Contact Us

Christopher Family Foundation
Clare Butterfield, *Executive Director*
clare@christopherff.org
630.225.8120 x115
www.christopherff.org

Davidoff Strategy
Delaney Monahan, *Project Manager*
www.davidoffstrategy.com



Introduction

In the spring of 2018, The Christopher Family Foundation (CFF) began exploring opportunities to support outdoor programming for families on Chicago's West Side.

The Foundation believes that unstructured play in a natural setting inoculates children against the harder edges of the world, and instills in them a sense of wonder. Through outdoor education, we hope to increase equitable access to nature for youth living on Chicago's West Side.

Thus began a fourteen month long process of preparation, exploration, and connection, culminating in awarding a \$100,000 a year grant, renewable for up to five years.



Framework

People are naturally responsive to the beauty of nature. We are creatures ourselves, and we relate to the nature around us. Children benefit from time spent in nature—particularly from unstructured, imaginative play—which has demonstrable benefits for a child’s health and wellbeing. Not only have these experiences been shown to reduce stress, increase concentration, and spark creativity, they can also help shape a child’s values and understanding of themselves and the world around them.

Knowing this doesn’t mean that everyone experiences nature the same way, or that the quality of an experience that works for someone of one background will be the same for someone of a different background. Children from dense urban environments may feel safer around people, and find the strangeness of a remote natural setting more frightening than soothing. In offering five years of support for a new initiative that would provide access to nature for children on the West Side of Chicago, we were committed to the value of nature-based experiences without being prescriptive as to how those experiences should be provided to these children.

Chicago’s West Side communities (which for this project, the Foundation defined as Austin, East and West Garfield Park, and North Lawndale) are some of the lowest income communities in Chicago. They also suffer from some of the highest rates of violent crime. While each of these neighborhoods is laid out around significant park resources (each one houses one of the Emerald Necklace parks designed by Frederick Law Olmsted), gang lines and recent histories of violence often mean that these parks are not consistently and meaningfully accessible to families in the neighborhood. But because we believe that time in nature is important for every child, we were determined to work in consultation with the community to find the best way forward.

Our desire to understand how to meaningfully contribute to nature-based experiences for children of the West Side was led by Kelley Christopher Schueler, trustee of The Christopher Family Foundation. It was shaped by her own experiences in nature growing up, as a former teacher, a parent to her own children, and by her experience in her family's foundation providing camp access to children. It was also shaped by her willingness to let the community tell her what it needed—a process of inquiry that increased the likelihood of success. As Kelley explains,

“Being a former Lutheran School teacher, for 8 years I watched my students experience nature firsthand at recess, through outdoor education programs, and field trips. Seeing the joy on my student's faces had a great impact on me. So much so, that I still remember their faces in those moments. Increased screen time, busy family schedules, and other factors have contributed to a lack of healthy developmental opportunities for modern children. For children in communities with relatively high rates of crime, there are additional barriers to playing outside and experiencing the natural world. That is why The Christopher Family Foundation went in search of new ideas to help children explore nature. We wanted to foster experiences of being fully alive in a living world.”



Triangle Garden, Photo courtesy of NeighborSpace.



Exploring

To understand the current experience of outdoor play and nature for West Side youth, the Foundation conducted a discovery process. This included assessments of existing offerings in the community and program concepts awaiting funding, as well as research to understand the needs and perspectives of community leaders and members.

This research was both internal and external. We surveyed the neighborhood, creating a program map, which identified existing programs, services, and target populations being served. We supplemented primary research with secondary research to assess trends and insights related to nature experiences for youth, and the impact of limited exposure to nature on youth, families and communities.

To aid us in our conversations in the neighborhoods, we sought the expertise of Faith in Place, a nonprofit dedicated to empowering people of all faiths all over Illinois to be leaders in caring for the Earth, and providing resources to educate, connect, and advocate for healthier communities. Over the course of 20 years, Faith in Place has served more than 1,000 houses of worship in Illinois and, specifically on Chicago's West Side, has conducted many listening sessions. We partnered with Faith in Place to understand the perspectives, thoughts, and sentiments of the West Side communities. Together, CFF and Faith in Place created a conversation guide to understand the available opportunities for youth and families to experience nature in their communities and capture the existing opportunities, gaps, needs, and potential.

In collaboration with Faith in Place, in the summer of 2018, we conducted a total of six focus groups; two focus groups—one for youth, and one for guardians

and caretakers—in three neighborhoods (North Lawndale, West Garfield Park, and Austin). CFF also partnered with Windy City Harvest of the Chicago Botanic Garden to complete an additional focus group with students in their Youth Farmers Program. In addition to the focus groups, CFF spoke directly with almost 30 community leaders and organizers, to hear from those who live and work in the community and have experience developing and implementing programs with the youth of North Lawndale, West Garfield Park, and Austin.

The community listening sessions and interviews provided an opportunity for CFF to learn how the community views itself and the opportunities that would best serve children and families living in their neighborhoods. Even with the partnership of Faith in Place and the efforts of both teams, the listening sessions were received cautiously by some community members. For most, there was energy and excitement discussing what is possible for the community. However, some members expressed skepticism due to previously broken promises and prior initiatives that did not meet expectations. Moreover, these communities have been the subject of many organizations and institutions research interest. Mindful of this and the inherent power dynamics of institutions utilizing communities as data sources, CFF and Faith in Place intentionally avoided recreating past experiences where community members did not receive proper compensation or reparation for time and effort. CFF responded to the guidance of community leaders and provided compensation for all focus groups, including young people.



McKinley Community Play Garden, Photo courtesy of NeighborSpace.

Through these conversations, CFF gathered insights about the trials, resiliency, and interests of the youth and families in these communities. We heard about the barriers to youth accessing the limited outdoor spaces in and around their neighborhoods, including the systemic issues of poverty, violence, segregation, and accessibility; the grassroots efforts to build community and create safe outdoor experiences; the passion and interest for spaces where children, their families, and the whole community can gather to experience nature in their neighborhoods safely. The insights generated from the focus groups and interviews underscored that for many people in Chicago's West Side communities, access to nature is strongly desired, but there are barriers intertwined with systematic racism, violence, and poverty. We then began to consider the possible next steps that could adequately respond to the complex, intersecting dynamics.

The Foundation heard that community residents shared our belief in the value of time in nature for their children, but that their experiences in and knowledge of their community would require that any offering be structured to respect their need for safety, and their prior experiences of outside organizations making promises that they did not keep.

Connecting



The insights and community feedback solidified the Foundation's interests in funding a community-based nature initiative on the West Side. In response, we considered issuing a program grant immediately following the discovery process. This would expedite the selection process and give grant recipients the opportunity to begin their work with the community sooner. However, because we had not found a program anywhere on the West Side specifically dedicated to providing unstructured time in nature, we determined a collaboration among multiple groups would be needed in order to design a program that provided both an in-depth natural experience, and a design that met the needs of neighborhood children and addressed the real concerns of their parents. We decided to craft a multi-stage process, which included planning grants followed by a program grant opportunity. The intention was to provide applicants more time to consider the needs and opportunities in the community, test out ideas, and build relationships with other youth and nature-based organizations. However, before moving forward with issuing the planning grant opportunity, we sought support from knowledgeable philanthropic organizations effectively working on the West Side.

We conducted outreach with stakeholders representing leading foundations effectively funding community development on the West Side and nature conservation in the Chicago area. We then brought these stakeholders together to leverage their expertise, hear their feedback on the research insights generated by the Discovery process, and get advice on how to effectively engage in the grantmaking process.

Under the guidance of these philanthropic leaders, we issued a request for proposals (RFP) for planning grants to provide collaborative groups of nonprofit organizations the chance to design an approach together that will provide experiences in nature for West Side children.



Planning Grants

Our conversations with both community residents and our colleagues in philanthropy helped us to identify features of the project that we thought were essential in a final project proposal. We hoped to see new collaborations form, and we wanted to see the leadership for the project come from within the community. Therefore, we required teams be led by an organization that was both based in, and staffed by, the affected community. We understood that collaboration takes time and costs money to a nonprofit organization. Our RFP offered five \$5,000 planning grants to teams that otherwise met our criteria. The precise content of the RFP was strongly influenced by our consultation with our fellow grantmakers. While the \$5,000 grant would likely only cover part of the cost of a robust planning process, it was offered without any constraint on use, and intended primarily to show our respect for the time teams invested in the process.

The applications we received for planning grants were evaluated internally and reviewed by three colleagues from other foundations who volunteered to assist us. Consensus was achieved on five. They were provided a document containing instructions for the required written grant submission, and asked to commit their availability for a live-pitch event. Each team had six weeks to complete final submissions and prepare their presentation.



Live Pitch

We determined early on that holding the live pitch event at a venue in the community would be an important signal that we as a foundation wanted to engage sincerely with the people we were hoping to support. We selected the Columbus Park Refectory, a beautiful historic building in the Austin neighborhood.

Our event started with welcome and a keynote by Deputy Governor Sol Flores, who has dedicated a significant part of her professional life to homeless youth on the West Side. Opening the afternoon, Deputy Governor Sol Flores reflected on the importance of nature in her own childhood and the critical role that nonprofits and social service agencies play in the current administration:

“We understand that government in this space provides a foundation for the work, but we need you to help us innovate. We need you to pilot programs like this. We need you to pound on our doors to let us know what we are getting right, what we are getting wrong, and what we must do to make sure that our young people and families are strengthened.”



Deputy Governor Sol Flores addresses the audience at the live pitch. Photo by Tim Frakes

Each team was then given 15 minutes to present their approach, with some time reserved for clarifying questions. The spirit in the room as this process began was warm and the energy high. Each team wanted to win the prize, but they were collegial with, and supportive of, each other. The organizations on each team have relationships with most of the organizations on the other teams, and those relationships are more valuable to them over time than the grant.

Again, we called on colleagues to assist us in evaluating the live pitches. Two of our evaluation panelists were from local foundations with deep commitments to supporting West Side organizations, and the third was a pastor from a congregation on the West Side. His presence added a street level view, and a check on any tendency to exaggerate by a team member. Were we to replicate this process, we would be sure to again include non-conflicted community members in the evaluation.



The live pitch was held at the Columbus Park Refectory in Chicago's Austin neighborhood. Photo by Tim Frakes

A Few Key Takeaways From the Process

CFF had not run a competition-style grant opportunity before, and we were creating the process while running it. In the course of doing so we gained some insights that are worth stating. Because this was not our usual grant process, we did not follow our normal pattern of review. Foundation staff provided due diligence on finances and good standing of all team members, but in retrospect we wished we had built in a period of time for site visits following the live pitch.

We also received written submissions from each team, which we did not ask our panel of evaluators to respond to, in an effort to minimize the requested time commitment. In retrospect we would have changed this. It would have asked more of our evaluators, but they would have been briefed prior to the live pitch.

We would note also that competitions are not without controversy in the field of philanthropy. While ours included only five teams, each of which had been compensated for their time in developing a final proposal, it still meant that each presenting team had only a 20% chance of gaining our support for their project. Odds for gaining support through our normal grants process, for organizations invited to submit a full proposal after a letter of inquiry, are significantly higher than that. We try to be mindful of what we are asking nonprofit organizations who seek our support. However, we were reassured of our decision to run this process as a competition with three thoughts. First, we had compensated each team for its time in developing a solid proposal. Second, we invited other foundations to join us for the live pitch, creating at least the possibility that another funder would choose to support an idea we did not end up selecting. And finally, the organizations are run by professionals, who understood the odds before deciding to participate. We think the nature of the competition inspired creativity and subsidized the time investment in new relationships. Ultimately, we concluded that our process was thoughtful, fair, and transparent. With some adjustments, we would consider employing a similar structure in the future.



Selecting a Finalist

Informed by the evaluators at the live pitch, the Foundation team reviewed the written and live presentations. Follow-up phone calls were made to teams to collect additional information as needed to evaluate ability to deliver on the promised work. With all that in hand a selection was made.

The final project chosen for five years of support was a collaboration put forward by NeighborSpace and the Garfield Park Community Council for nature play areas for young children called The West Side Nature Play Network. This innovative project envisions building five small nature play areas designed with natural elements to encourage unstructured and imaginative play. Land for the play areas is already managed by NeighborSpace, and they have successfully piloted this approach on the Southwest Side of Chicago.

A key aspect of this project is its inclusion of a program to train caregivers, daycare providers, teachers, parents, and others on why nature play is important for healthy development. The successful implementation of this project will provide access to natural settings for hundreds of children within walking distance of their homes.



The West Side Nature Play Network planning team. Photo by Tim Frakes

Some of the other projects submitted included the incorporation of nature experiences into existing educational or social programs, followed by a culminating deep wilderness experience—programs that undoubtedly impact the youth involved. When we began this project, these were the types of models we imagined.

However, because we began our robust process with neighborhood listening sessions, we ended up selecting a more unexpected and ambitious project—one that tackles accessibility head-on, for many more children.

The community organizing aspect of the selected project includes greater risk. Community outreach can be difficult, and the scale proposed by the winning project over five years is ambitious. The Foundation believes the higher risk comes the potential for higher reward for the community. It meets the needs of more children and creates hard assets within the communities that will endure beyond the end of the funding period. The project has just begun, and has five years to bear good fruit. We are excited and hopeful for what it might become.

We started out expecting to support a project that would bring children to nature. Because we listened to our West Side neighbors, and because they were generous enough to share their insights with us, we ended up selecting a project that will bring nature to children.