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4th Grader parent

When we were planning our family, my wife and I looked at Lincoln Square with a view to moving to the neighborhood. As we walked around I vividly remember passing Waters School and seeing the garden for the first time. I was totally amazed. I grew up in a city, and all the schools I attended were surrounded by asphalt yards; I had never seen a school that looked as wonderful and inviting as Waters. We researched to see if Waters would be the school that we would send our kids to, and read about the ecology program. I knew then that Waters was the school for us. When our son was old enough for pre-K we were sad to discover that Waters (at that time) did not offer pre-K, so he went to Chappell. However, we enjoyed our time at Chappell, so when they offered Ewan a place in Kindergarten we were a little torn, but I knew that I wanted him to experience the ecology program at Waters.

In preparation for starting at Waters I started taking Ewan to the garden nights, and what a welcome we received. The friendship and sense of community that we experienced in the garden made me certain that we had made the right choice in sending Ewan to Waters. Garden nights rapidly became one of the highlights of our week. Ewan made friends with whom he enjoyed exploring and playing in all the nooks and crannies of the garden; through watching the prairie areas change with the seasons he has learned about the natural flora and fauna of the Chicago area, and the cycles of nature; through planting, tending, harvesting and eating produce he has learned about where his food comes from. The garden has also instilled in Ewan a sense of wonder at the natural world, and the importance of living sustainably and working to preserve what is left of it.

For us the ecology program has been the stand-out experience at Waters, and not being able to fully participate in that was one of our great sadnesses during the 18 months of remote learning. However, the remote classes with Mr Leki were a highlight of remote learning, and proved to be the spark for many family outings, as Ewan and I walked the streets of the neighborhood trying to identify the tree species that he had learned about in class, or went to the Waters garden to draw plants and leaves. Upon return to in-person learning Ewan has loved being part of the Mighty Acorns and we are excited for him to continue with that next year.

Growing up in the city with so many outdoor spaces covered in concrete or plastic, this early exposure to nature is vital for our kids. Childhood nature exposure is associated with increased self-esteem, and better quality of life as children, along with improved mental health in adulthood.¹ Given the future environmental challenges that our children will face, this education and grounding in ecology will also prove invaluable, regardless of their ultimate career choices. Indeed, childhood exposure to nature has been shown to foster the development of the pro-environmental behaviors that will help our children to tackle the environmental crises they will face as adults.²

To the best of my knowledge the Waters garden, and the ecology program under Mr Leki, are unmatched, certainly in Chicago, and perhaps anywhere in the country. The teachers and families at Waters school, past and present, should be proud of having developed the garden, and of having provided so many children with that essential exposure to nature and grounding in ecology and the environment. We would be devastated to see the ecology program scaled back and/or the garden diminished.

Jeremy

¹ Preuß et al., *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health* 2019, 16(10), 1809; <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16101809>

² Collado & Evans, *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 2019, 61, 30; <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2018.12.001>