

Forest and Nature School project looking for support



By Bill Kilpatrick

Marion Lott, an educator of 27 years, 10 of which were spent in international teaching, has a goal: to build stronger relationships with her community and to serve the land and enhance the educational experience of children in North Hastings. How does she plan on doing this? By starting up a Forest and Nature School in North Hastings in collaboration with indigenous peoples, and the parents and children within the area. On May 10 a dozen parents from as far away as Killaloe and Barry's Bay came out to Maynooth library to hear Lott's proposal and get more information on forest and nature schools. If you have never heard of a Forest and Nature school you are not alone. They first began in the Denmark, Sweden and the Scandinavian countries in the 1950s and only began in Canada in 2012 as an educational initiative of the Child and Nature Alliance of Canada. The alliance defines a Forest Nature School as: "An educational ethos and practice that centers the land and the child-at-play. Children and educators build a relationship with the land through regular and repeated access to the same outdoor space over an extended period of time. Educators support learning through a pedagogical [teaching] framework that is rooted in place and play, directed and inspired by the child, and driven by a process of inquiry." However, Lott quotes the Ottawa Forest and Nature School Handbook which points out that, "The movement to connect children and youth with nature is not new. It has been and is a fundamental way of being, knowing, and learning for many Indigenous communities and cultures since time immemorial." When the Child and Nature Alliance of Canada first began this program back in 2012 it was not co-created with indigenous peoples and this was a problem as the alliance acknowledges on their website: "The origins of the Child and Nature Alliance of Canada and Forest School Canada are rooted in white settler thinking and approaches. We are an organization currently led by white settlers, headquartered on the unceded traditional territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabe. We have imposed a settler colonial way of being with the Land because our programs were not co-created with Indigenous people. This approach means we perpetuate and benefit from colonization in the ways that we operate, and this causes harm. We want to repair our relationships with the Indigenous communities and people we have harmed, and, if they are willing, work towards co-creating trusting, safe, and reciprocal relationships with them. From that place of reciprocity, we hope to recreate the Forest and Nature School Practitioners Course, and co-create all future programming with Indigenous partners across Canada. In doing that, we hope that Indigenous and Western worldviews will have equitable voice and space in our programs, so that they are safe, meaningful, and culturally relevant for all participants." For Lott it is very important to acknowledge that she is a white settler who is planning on running an outdoor educational course on the unceded territory of the Algonquin people and that she not only involves, but partners directly with "Indigenous knowledge keepers and elders to help co-create programs to support the Truth and Reconciliation Commission calls to action for education." Lott said that the last two years that she spent teaching in northern Quebec in the Cree community of Nemaska exposed her to the idea of a forest and nature school and the importance of partnering with Indigenous peoples to ensure its success. Lott is not looking to supplant the current education system, but instead she

is looking to enhance children's learning through an alternative day of school involving creative play and risk taking in an outdoor environment. Lott highlighted the many benefits of forest and nature schools and the idea of unstructured play as a learning tool. Some benefits outlined by Lott include, improved attention, concentration and memory, increased physical health and gross motor skills, enhanced problem solving and conflict resolution skills, increased resiliency and risk management skills, improved mental and emotional health, increased creativity and most importantly it's fun. Lott has a number of goals that she needs to meet in order to get this project off the ground. Most importantly she requires land in a central area of North Hastings to hold the sessions on and the land needs to be in a sustainable location with access to shelter in the event of inclement weather. She is looking for volunteers to help run the program and set up a board of directors to help guide the program and secure funding as well. She also is looking for any volunteers that would be willing to help with fundraising, volunteer work, and/or donations of needed equipment. Lott is looking to connect and partner with local Indigenous leaders and knowledge keepers to ensure that the program is grounded in traditional knowledge of the people who have lived here since time immemorial. Lott is looking to do some trial runs by possibly hosting a 'pop-up' event over the summer or the early fall that could involve a two to three hour session, where parents could drop off their children or stay and see what happens at the Forest and Nature School. Of course, informed consent forms would be a must for any children attending the event. One of the most important aspects to the program according to Lott is that children develop a reciprocal relationship with the land and gain an understanding of themselves as a part of the natural world. In her final comments Lott made her own commitment to creating and nurturing a reciprocal relationship to the land based not only on her own experience but also the words of Robin Wall Kimmerer author of *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2015). Lott says: 'In my own humble way as a distant immigrant to this land, I strive to become naturalized to place in the same way as the non-native plant Plantain (*plantago major*) has. Kimmerer says of the Plantain, 'To be useful, to fit into small spaces, to coexist with others and to heal wounds.' Any forest school program that I would be honored to develop on these sacred lands, would be as in the words of Kimmerer, 'to become naturalized is to live as if your children's future matters, to take care of the land as if our lives and the lives of all our relatives depend on it. Because they do.' For those interested in finding out more about forest and nature schools visit Lott's Facebook page at www.facebook.com/groups/572855564649210 called Forest School and Nature Maynooth; or, contact her by email at forestbluenatureschool@gmail.com.