

So you know a little about what I do and who I am- but I will give you a little more history than you may be asking for. I promise it will be relevant.

My mother is from Bath, Maine. While her mother was an immigrant, the rest of her family had been in the Bath and Waterville area for generations- where she grew up her whole life, surrounded by family - good, bad, and indifferent. My father is from what I like to call the foothills of the Appalachians. Not in the mountains, but where they settled in Horsepasture, VA, once they came down from them. His family quite literally was there for hundreds of years. Same town- lots of family.

I grew up sitting on the porch with my family, listening to the music and stories of our collective history. My story was literally passed down to me on that carport, even the bad stuff... My family doesn't hide the bad, odd, or a little unsteady... we just put a tiara on it, name it Aunt Ginny, and go to the town parade. After all, all of it is a part of our family, our story - Us.

I believe that this front porch experience has influenced everything in my life, throughout all of my careers and paths that I have forged, my 6 different majors in college until I was forced to narrow it down, and even in how I have raised my kids-

I have one constant- I crave community. I seek it wherever I land - and if it isn't there? I try to build it. My mother used to say I grew roots where ever I sat still for a minute (which, if you know me and my chipmunk speed, you can imagine I never sat still long, so growing roots was a pretty impressive feat.)

When I started working for the Kennebunkport Conservation Trust 12 years ago- I took the job (one of 4 I was working at the time) simply because of something my executive director Tom said in the interview-

"We have always known what we were saving our land from, but now we don't know who we are saving it for."

This was on the heels of "Last Child in the Woods," a book raising concerns about kids spending more and more time indoors and in front of a screen instead of exploring their backyard and climbing trees. To Tom, it stood to reason that if kids weren't out on the land knowing all the amazing things it had to offer- who would be there in the future to want to carry on the legacy of the Trust? Who would fulfill our promise as a land trust to conserve land in perpetuity?

I think he hired me because, in my interview, I referred to myself as growing up a feral woodland child exploring my forest. It was just weird enough for him to give me a shot, if nothing else, to see who in the world would consider *that* to be an essential description of themselves for a job.... He took a chance on me, and we both are glad he did.

We started with elementary programming in just one of our elementary schools. The goal was to get students out onto our properties, have community members be our leaders to create intergenerational connections, and teach them about the town's history and the ecology of the local landscape. In a few short years, we had expanded these programs to all 4 of our elementary schools- each going to different properties and filling the needs of teachers.

We never told them what we would teach- we asked them what they needed help with. Our goal was always to fill a need- fill the gap like glue... Sometimes like the super glue that sticks to your fingers for 12 years no matter how often you wash them....

So I will ask you, how much do you remember before 5th grade? Yep, me either-

After asking Tom that very question, I got the go-ahead to expand into the high school, and we changed the name of our program from Trust in our Children to Trust in Education, TiED. It better described our mission...

we wanted the youth in our towns to be TiED to the land, TiED to their history, and TiED to the community. We were starting to build our porch.

Again, we went to the school principal and asked what they needed... were there any gaps we could fill?

Turned out they were working on building an Alternative Education Program. A program for HS students that weren't thriving in the traditional classroom. So naturally- I thought- sure! We totally can manage this! With a little bit of trepidation and a whole lot of hope, I went to the board with the idea of building a "Learning Trail." Building this trail would fill all the needs of the students for school.

They would get math skills by designing and building bridges and calculating board feet. History, Science, and English through the research and writing the sign information. Art through creating the signs, and for sure, all the hauling of lumber around a 1-mile trail would give them a PE credit!

This was not all sunshine and rainbows- There were some rough times- when they first came to Trust, they wanted nothing to do with me. Headphones in, hoodies up, they sulked and smoked and dragged their feet.

But then the most amazing thing happened. These students that hated going to school were coming every day. They started to become those young kids again, discovering all the wonders of the land. In fact, I broke my leg 3 days before the ribbon cutting, and two of the boys were so excited about something they had built on the trail. They had found rocks throughout the woods and hauled them over to make a stone walkway about halfway through the trail. I didn't think I could get out there, but that was not going to do. The two of them picked me up under my arms and carried me out into the woods to show me... now THAT was their full PE credit right there!

And you know what? They still come- 9 years later, to walk their dogs or to say Hi, one of them got married there. Alternative Education students started holding their graduation at the Trust, coming to decorate the Trust for holidays- In a town where they felt they had no place, in a school where they felt invisible- We filled the gap. We were able to give them the community they craved.

As these students returned to the school and talked, and our teachers told the stories of the learning trail- our properties became the subject of curiosity. Env Ed students needed a place to do water testing for class- we were that place; the freshman class needed a place to go for the day that all the other students were taking SAT and PRE SAT- the teachers created lessons, and our landscape was the place. The track coach needed trails for students to run on - Our trails became their trails.

Our front porch grew.

Then came the Gulf of Maine Field Studies class- While working with High School students, we noticed something- they were changing. These happy kindergartners were re-appearing in HS completely changed- and it was more than just hormones. They were more anxious; they were frustrated; they were depressed. They talked negatively about Env Science classes and not wanting to take them because they were so depressing. They were disconnecting... for all our hard work to connect them; they were starting to throw up their hands in despair.

Two studies involving thousands of children and college students show that anxiety has increased so substantially since the 1950s that typical schoolchildren during the 1980s reported more anxiety than child psychiatric patients did during the 1950s. That was 40 years ago, and those anxieties have only gotten worse. The findings appear in the December issue of the American Psychological Association's (APA) *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

A new threat was coming into focus, and our young people were stressed.

In a time when the world is facing its biggest threat in climate change, many adults- including well-meaning land trusts- are placing the mantle at our students' feet. Saying, "These bright kids will save the world some day ."They feel all that pressure- with NO AGENCY TO CHANGE ANYTHING- As they learn about what is happening globally and feel the pressure of it falling to them to solve- they feel hopeless and helpless-

"we can't do anything about it- why bother...."

We created the Gulf of Maine Field Studies through the Gulf of Maine Institute's NOAA grant, a collaboration between KHS, UNE, and KCT. Our goal was to give students agency by taking a global issue and bringing it to their local landscape. Showing them how to do real science and empowering their voice in their community. Through data collection and community-based projects, we tackled the complex problems that climate change presents to our three towns. As they led information campaigns, held community interviews, and embarked on real projects, we saw that these amazing young people were creating real change and coming alive again.

Their influence on the community came in many forms. A KCT board member insisted we finally take the leap and go net-zero as an organization to show the students we were with them. The town manager supported a 6 town consortium of coastal communities developing resiliency plans. The fire chief in Kennebunk went back to the select board after the previous approval of an SUV and asked for an electric vehicle. Kennebunk is the first town nationwide to have an electric command vehicle, and Chief Rowe openly stated it was because of the students. Most notably, the students have recently supported Community Conversations and community field trips to a town marsh they have been studying. They will create a living shoreline as an example to educate community members on natural solutions to protect our marshes and their importance in climate change mitigation.

Their empowered voice started honest conversations to lead to real solutions within our community. They began to understand that they are a PART of the environment- not separate from it- and that their projects serve the community needs and the needs of the environment. The town listened. They were able to address complicated issues in our town through community conversations. Subjects that adults couldn't talk to each other about.

Gaining the attention of funders, this led to The Climate Initiative-a national non-profit born out of the Kennebunkport Conservation Trust that seeks to empower youth voices for climate action- This has been a bold move for a land trust to take on in such a divided time. But through our community conversations and work throughout the years, we have learned-

At the end of the day, we all have the same basic needs and desires. We want food on our table, shelter over our heads, and a livelihood to provide those. We want safety for our families and connection, a community, and a sense of belonging.

We argue out of fear of losing or not being able to attain any one of these things.

I told you I would get back to my parents. Remember how long they lived in their respective hometowns? In the past, we used to inherit community- as a birthright. We were born into a place where everyone knew each other- often, there was a support system. When one of our basic needs was threatened, systems were in place to help. We knew our neighbors, and they knew us- it wasn't perfect. Now we are more nomadic- we don't live in the same places as our grandparents and their parents. That connection is not there. So while we crave connection, security, and community, we sometimes have to create that for ourselves; it is no longer handed to us through a long thread of ancestry.

Recently my son Henry lost a mentor in his life. This man was also a volunteer at our land trust but was Henry's bus driver- and music mentor. Henry struggled a bit in school- with changing school systems he had a hard time

fitting in. Mark took him under his wing, and the seat behind the driver became his safe space; eventually, Mark became his music mentor, sharing songs and becoming one of Henry's biggest fans.

At the memorial, I was sitting with our executive director and other Trust people, and as Henry performed, the lighthouse keeper leaned over to me and said you have raised such a great kid- I said- No, we all did.

Because we did- From a young age, the Trust took Henry in when others did not. Karl, one of our board members, took him up in a plane. Bud, a board member and trail steward took him out on the John Deere, which to a 5-year-old was about as cool as it could get! Craig, one of my volunteers, took Henry to see Flying Santa on the island when I couldn't go. Russ, our Board President, would let Henry drive the gator to help clean up after trail races. Tom, our executive director, always let Henry play music at events and shared his music with him. The Trust was an integral part of Henry's feeling accepted and part of a community, and I am not sure they even knew the influence that they all had.

Every land trust should have a Henry... Every land trust should have multiple Henrys- we should be striving to be that common thread that weaves us all together-

We tell the story of our land, it's history, and its importance. But that story is incomplete without the people who lived, struggled, loved, and stewarded the land we wish to preserve.

We are a small land trust- during this time, we had only 3 employees- and only one doing education and outreach.

12 years ago- We had a vision- and a willingness to fill the needs of our community- and the tenacity to believe we could do it- to build a front porch big enough and strong enough to support all those who come to it. All those who come to learn about the land they live on, whether they have lived there for hundreds of years or just a few. Everyone has a seat.

We are now a part of many front porch stories- weddings, funerals, birthday parties, proposals, memorials, treks on trails...

As land trusts, we have a unique opportunity to unite our communities and connect through things we all value- the land we share and love. To reconnect people to each other in a community that we build.

If we are tasked with preserving our land in perpetuity, how do we do that? How do we engage everyone in the importance of this task? How do we bring all people to the table, so they understand that they are a part of this story? This is their chapter, and they are a part of this environment.

How do we become the front porch of our communities? How do we create a porch big enough and expansive enough to build a stronger, more vibrant future for our land and our people?

And as Margaret Meade said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."