

Sharing the Lessons of Stewards Training With a New Generation

A Watershed Stewards' Tale

Ned McConnell became a Watershed Steward in the spring of 2000. When he first started as a Steward, Ned preferred working on stream restoration and enhancement projects and spent a lot of time working with Clark Public Utilities, Vancouver/Clark Parks, and the Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge. He planted native trees and shrubs, removed invasive Ricefield Bulrush, and installed fencing around high quality oak trees.

All this field work gave Ned a solid understanding of ecology and the complex relationships between plants, animals, and the environment. He developed an appreciation for wild areas and a keen desire to preserve those areas for the next generation. Ned served on the Vancouver Urban Forestry Commission in 2002 and 2003, advising the city on ways to enhance the urban environment by establishing pockets of nature.

Something changed for Ned when he volunteered to help at the Columbia River Watershed Festival in September 2004. Watching hundreds of children learn about nature in a beautiful setting at Vancouver Lake Park gave him an understanding of how powerful environmental education can be. Ned had worked at a variety of outreach events including the Lacamas Festival and the Clark County Fair, but seeing children learning the lessons of nature firsthand inspired him.

In early 2005, Ned worked with several middle school students on a service learning project to build a wildlife garden at the Center for Agricultural Science and Environmental Education (CASEE). Working side by side with youth helped Ned teach some of the same lessons he learned years ago working on environmental projects. It also showed him how powerful service learning can be.



Ned working with a student at the Hazel Dell Community Garden.

In Spring 2005, WSU Extension staff member Caitlin Blethen recruited Ned to help with the Hazel Dell School and Community Garden. The garden allowed Ned to become a mentor for Clark County's youth. Through the cultivation of fruits and vegetables in the garden, Ned helps students understand their connection to the natural world. He delights in the excited children who come to work in the garden week after week and harvest the fruits of their labor.

Caitlin finds Ned resourceful and self-guided. "He sees something that needs doing, and he takes it upon himself to get it done. I never worry that Ned will leave a task incomplete," says Caitlin. Ned enjoys his new role as a mentor to youth and even volunteers at the Community Restorative Justice Garden at CASEE. According to Ned, "Kids are like plants. If you put them in a rich environment, they grow". Perhaps the same can be said of Watershed Stewards.

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