

Mother Nature's Child: Alumna advocates for outdoor play

IN 2007, FILMMAKER CAMILLA ROCKWELL '68 was traveling when she discovered Richard Louv's *Last Child in the Woods*. A new grandmother, she bought a copy for her daughter-in-law. On the airplane home, she decided to read the book herself, and by the time she landed, Rockwell knew she had found the subject for her next film. *Mother Nature's Child*, a 60-minute documentary, looks at nature's role in children's health and development, from toddlerhood through high school. It includes insights from, among others, Louv and Jon Young, author of *Coyote's Guide to Connecting with Nature*, and will be aired on PBS stations, as well as at teachers' conferences and before groups of parents and citizens. Rockwell lives in Burlington, Vermont, and is married to Tim Wick '68.

Q. WHAT WAS THE TOPIC'S APPEAL?

A. In reading [Louv's] book, I realized many children today are growing up without a connection to nature. This film marks a moment in time when one generation can still remember what it was like to play freely outside. When we're gone, who will remember what it was like to have a free, unstructured connection to nature without fear and anxiety?

Q. WHERE DOES THAT FEAR ORIGINATE?

A. The media accentuate all kinds of dangers outside. Many parents are working and they're not around when their kids get home from school, so it may feel safer to have their children inside in front of the TV or the computer rather than playing outdoors. I'm not judging lifestyles, and certainly technology is part of our lives, but often they're not thinking about the kinds of impressions that are coming through those mediums. I grew up in a neighborhood in Rochester, New York, where we rode our bikes everywhere and played in everybody's

backyard. My parents never knew where we were; they'd ring the dinner bell and we'd come home. When my own children played in our rural neighborhood [in New Hampshire], I wasn't dealing with the kinds of fears that parents have now. And there are other concerns. For instance, natural playgrounds with these huge boulders are a popular replacement for metal playgrounds, but parents are afraid their children are going to fall off the boulders. In fact, kids learn balance better when they're not walking on flat floors, when they're navigating uneven ground and climbing. That informs the brain in all kinds of ways. The textures in nature stimulate the brain in ways that indoor environments can't, much less flat-screen monitors!

Q. WHAT'S THE FILM'S TAKE-AWAY MESSAGE?

A. I don't want to depress people, so I focused on the positive aspects. I want to offer parents information so they can support each other in dealing with childhood obesity, depression, and attention disorders, as well as initiate a larger discussion for

teachers about the powerful differences between learning indoors and learning outdoors. I'm hoping educators and policymakers will use this as a foundation to begin their conversations.

The message is: No matter where you live, there are possibilities for promoting the health-through-nature connection. For more information, visit www.mothenaturesmovie.com.

Rockwell was interviewed for this piece by Sarah Zobel '84.

