

Ear to the Ground: An interview with Jane Tesner Kleiner



Jane Tesner Kleiner is a Registered Landscape Architect (RLA), ecologist and environmental educator with over 25 years of experience in design, project management and program coordination. She loves working with schools and community partners to create spaces and programs to get kids outside, connecting with nature.

Tell us a little about yourself. How did you get started in this field?

I found a love of working with school kids as a volunteer naturalist for the Ann Arbor Public School's Environmental Education program. We took kids out on fields trips for all 1st - 5th graders. We were so lucky to have lots of natural areas, including Metro Parks, wetlands, streams and gravel pits. Then I met the amazing Rick Plecha (elementary science teacher) at Field Elementary School in Canton, MI and we started designing green schoolyards in his district. My work in Michigan focused on watershed improvements. When I moved to Washington in 2006, I started volunteering at my son's school when they wanted to build a garden. The district, knowing my professional background, asked for a master plan to make sure they had a guiding tool for the garden improvements. Over 9 years, we have built 7 phases of projects at that school, including sensory, butterfly,

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accessible play, nature play, imagination play and outdoor classrooms.

Do you recall anything from your childhood that may have played a role in your becoming an environmental educator? What was your earliest connection to nature?

I was so lucky as a kid to grow up in a huge subdivision that had creeks and forests. My brother and I would roam the forests and floodplains all the time, especially winter in Michigan with snow and ice. We also had a huge hill in the backyard for sledding. We didn't take many vacations as a kid, but I spent most of my childhood roaming Bell Creek, the forests and floodplains.

What has been a particularly memorable moment in your career?

By combining my landscape architecture skills with my love for ecology, I have been very fortunate to have worked on some great projects! Most of my work has been urban/suburban so there has always be a "people" connection that allowed for interpretive signage, places to explore and sit and observe the wildlife. While the bigger projects, like the Rouge River Oxbox restoration at The Henry Ford museum and the visitor improvements at Salmon-Morgan Creeks nature area are great, it is working with schools on their small gardens, habitats and projects where the kids take ownership and pride that make such a huge difference.

What challenges (professionally) have you had to overcome?

Great question.....as every job has its challenges. I have worked for large and small design firms, as well as local governmental agencies. One of the challenges is educating the budget folks that adding public amenities to some projects make a huge difference for folks visiting the areas. Also, finding a balance with the wonderful grounds and maintenance crews who have a lot on their plate with limited resources, while we add more gardens and natural areas. One great outcome of COVID is that people are really understanding the need

and value for nature. Before COVID, green schoolyards could be seen as "Oh, that is nice and all but not mandatory." We now know that having all types of gardens really make a difference well beyond academics.

What have been your greatest rewards?

Introducing kids to nature! So many kids I have worked with have lots of fears about nature and don't have a lot of understanding about plants, animals, habitats, etc. My greatest rewards are when they get to see the result of their hard work, flowers blooming, vegetables are ripe enough to harvest, seed collecting, etc. When kids know that I can trust them with tools and then they can go get the job done, they are so excited. When they bring their families on the weekends because they are so excited, that is the added bonus.

What are some of the best resources you've found for the work you do?

We are lucky in southwest Washington to have lots of great partners working with schools. We have formed a coalition called the Clark County Nature Network where we meet to understand what the organizations or agencies are doing and how we can partner to make a difference with schools. Some organizations are great for plantings, trees and stewardship so kids get lots of hands on project based learning. Then they get to watch their projects grow. Other partners help with the planning and design of Green Schoolyards and can help get projects in the ground. A local arborist can help salvage trees to be repurposed for nature playgrounds. Our urban forestry can help add shade trees to playgrounds which are usually lacking any nature. We are starting to look at project opportunities to connect high school CTE partners to get gardens in at elementary schools, as they have the green houses and wood shops.

What project(s) are you currently working on?

It has been exciting for our two largest local school districts, Evergreen and Vancouver, which passed capital bonds several years ago. Those funds have provided for lots of improvements at

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existing schools and over a dozen new and/or replacement schools. I have been incredibly fortunate to work either as the owner's representative on the projects or lead landscape architect on a few. This has allowed me to bring my knowledge of Green Schoolyards to the table and work with all of the staff and design teams to rethink school campus design. Most of the new schools have working gardens, increased native habitat for lots of species, including birds and butterflies, outdoor classrooms, accessible pathways, nature play areas, rock cycle gardens, meadows and interpretive signage. The projects include lots of natural colors, textures, plant types and features that haven't been done at local schools. And the response has been great! If teachers want to teach about parts of the plant, they now have lots of different kinds to choose from on campus. There is now a diversity of colors and patterns to study art or writing. And lots of paths to go for walks to support social-emotional learning through the natural areas.

I am also the lead coordinator for the Clark County Nature Network working with local partners to connect our community to nature. Our partnership with the US Fish and Wildlife Refuge has stepped up to provide funding to expand our service to the community to reach more families and partners.

How has COVID-19 impacted your work?

As we know, there have been lots of pros and cons to COVID impacts. As a mom with two school age kids, my time has been more limited for work during the day as I help with school. While I have loved all of the time with my kids, there are also been other opportunities. I have been on some great Zoom calls with partners from around the world, like the BioBlitz program that covers ALL schools in England.....so cool. There have been so many great collaborations with Green Schoolyard partnerships. I supported the Green Schoolyard America COVID 19 response to create on-line resources [<https://www.greenschoolyards.org/>

covid-learn-outside]. Many of the resources are now available to schools who want to create and use outdoor classrooms as part of their solutions to getting kids safely back into school.

What inspires you now? What people have inspired you?

The research is so abundant now on the benefits of nature for our overall health, it isn't hard to make the case to add nature back into our communities. I am inspired by the teachers who can't wait to add more features, the kids who can't wait to show you the caterpillar they discovered and the families that spend more time outside now that they know where to go and what to do with their kids. My colleagues are definitely my current inspirations as they have retooled how they deliver their work, due to COVID, to still reach kids with on-line learning and inspire kids to explore their own yards, schools and neighborhoods.

Who are your environmental heroes?

I have always been inspired by Rachel Kaplan, professor from the University of Michigan, who helped guide my graduate school work with schoolyards and her book *Design with People in Mind*. The writings of Rachel Carson, walking the shores of the Atlantic Ocean, and Mardy Murie about her time in Alaska, are my go to readings. I was also inspired by Richard Louv's *Last Child in the Woods*. And then there are the biggies, like David Attenborough and Jane Goodall.....what can I say....they are amazing.

What books are currently on your nightstand?

I am currently reading David Attenborough's *A Life on Our Planet* and Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*. It feels so imperative to get kids to know their local landscapes, to understand what birds, insects and plants are here and why they are important. As a parent, I want my kids to know and understand what we see everyday.

Do you have favorite places to go when you need to connect with nature?

Oh yes! I am a big fan of those little known places, like the back trails along the Salmon Creek, the long trails at Vancouver Lake and Lacamas Lake here in Vancouver. My ideal adventures are to the Mt. Adams and Mt. Rainier trails, especially up in the alpine meadows. They



take your breath away.....I could just sit up there for days!

Are you hopeful about the future?

Oh yes! There are so many talented people working on the Greening of Schoolyard front, that I know we are making a difference and this work matters! So many partners are rethinking their approach for diversity, equity and inclusion, I have faith in their ability to connect with even more families. And our local schools have put their efforts behind sustainable landscapes that are more natural. Growing up in nature, I had the joy of wandering the woods for hours and sitting in meadows in the fall opening milkweed seed pods, just to watch the seeds float away. Robert Michael Pyle said at the UERC conference last March, that kids are facing the extinction of experience. This really stuck with me. My job is to help recreate spaces to allow kids the experiences that I had everyday. At one local school, we were able to create a 1-acre meadow.....a first for the district. I can't wait for students to have the opportunity to just sit in the middle and listen to the wind blowing through the grasses and the endless parade of cirtters calling that space home.

