

The Merry Leaflet

Merry Lea Environmental Learning Center of Goshen College | P.O. Box 263, Wolf Lake, IN 46796 | 260.799.5869 | goshen.edu/merrylea

Seminarians Study Sustainability at Merry Lea

Benjamin and Rianna Isaak-Krauss bring a unique perspective to the 2018 cohort of Merry Lea's Sustainability Leadership Semester (SLS): they are seminary students rather than undergraduates. The married couple will graduate from the Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS) in 2019 with credits from the SLS on their transcripts.

Benjamin is pursuing an M.Div. with an emphasis on theology and peace-making, and Rianna is working on an M.A. in spiritual formation. They are the first AMBS students to incorporate the SLS into their academic programs.

Like the other four SLS students in their cohort, Benjamin and Rianna participated in an eight-day canoe trip and are exploring the local watershed through weekly field trips. They take the same courses on water resources, environmental policy, ethics, sustainability and problem-solving, and they live in Merry Lea's student housing. The two add a theological bent and a little extra life experience from other parts of the world to group discussions. Benjamin grew up in Bammental, Germany, and Rianna is from Winnipeg, Canada.

Benjamin and Rianna say that the SLS does not feel like a step down to them even though they are older students. While they may have more to offer in the area of ethics, neither had taken science courses since high school. The opportunity to learn from scientists and other practitioners who work with environmental issues daily was important to them.

The articulation agreement between Goshen College and AMBS that made their participation possible grew out of years of collaboration between Merry Lea and the seminary (see page 2). When Luke Gascho, Merry Lea's executive director, taught a course on creation care at AMBS several years ago, he saw firsthand the interest that many seminary students had in sustainability. Rebecca Slough, then dean of the seminary, also recognized the ways that both institutions could benefit by making place-based experiential learning on sustainability available to seminary students.

"I think the SLS can be a great experience for pastors. It would especially benefit seminarians who are interested in leadership roles in other contexts

because it provides a framework for working on complex problems in the public square," Luke remarked. The experience can help seminarians apply their theology to particular places and contexts. The most likely candidates for the program might be students who are pursuing a master's in peace studies.

In many ways, Benjamin and Rianna typify the kind of seminary students who can benefit most from the SLS. While their future plans are still hazy, both have a longstanding commitment to the earth that intertwines with their faith.

Rianna sees many links between what she describes as "spiritual sustainability" in a post-Christian era and the need

[see Seminarians, page 7](#)



Benjamin and Rianna Isaak-Krauss in front of a pocket prairie at Merry Lea's Rieth Village where they are currently studying.

An Audacious Idea


Merry Lea—Seminary Connections

In the fall of 1999, Dave Miller, Mary Linton, Bill Minter and I sat around the table in the Merry Lea library sharing our visions for collegiate opportunities. Our ideas included a summer program in sustainable agriculture, a semester-long learning community on ecology and sustainability and graduate work in environmental education. I am delighted that now, the Agroecology Summer Intensive, the Sustainability Leadership Semester and the Master of Arts in Environmental Education are well-established programs at Merry Lea.

I believe it was Dave Miller who named another idea that I thought was a bit audacious at the time. Yet I saw the value of the suggestion. We discussed ways seminary students would benefit from learning about the environment, stewardship, theology and land at Merry Lea. We also imagined pastors learning about stewardship of the environment at post-baccalaureate levels.

This seedling idea germinated and took root in a manner similar to the growth of other programs at Merry Lea. It was not an “all-at-once” process, but rather a “here a little, there a little” ecological emergence. Below are some of the activities that led to the intersections Merry Lea and Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Ind., pursue together today.

- **September 2002**—Merry Lea held the first annual Where Earth and People Meet Fall Conference with the theme of “Exploring Earth, Hope, and Environment.” Several pastors and AMBS students were among those who attended.
- **December 2003**—The AMBS librarian asked me to present the rationale behind green buildings to the AMBS Library Planning Committee. I included the faith basis that undergirded the sustainable planning we were doing for Rieth Village. They decided to redesign their library and were awarded a Gold rating from the U.S. Green Building Council.
- **April 2007**—An AMBS student who participated in our fall conferences asked me to be her advisor on her senior project. She designed a seminary course titled “Creation Care: Theology, Ethics and Spirituality.” The course expected students to participate in the fall conference at Merry Lea. I was honored to co-teach the course from 2007–2013. Several seminary students also completed internship requirements with projects they did at Merry Lea.
- **March 2014**—We began the planning that would enable seminary students to take the Sustainability Leadership Semester as part of a graduate degree at AMBS. The AMBS academic dean and I worked through logistics for this arrangement. The faculty at AMBS and Goshen College approved the proposal in the spring of 2016.
- **September 2014**—AMBS held the first Rooted and Grounded conference. Merry Lea sponsored this event rather than continuing to host its own fall conference. Rooted and Grounded has taken place four times now. Many seminary students, pastors and sustainability students have participated in it.
- **August 2018**—AMBS students enroll in the Sustainability Leadership Semester!

What a good journey this has been! We look forward to more interactions in this relationship. While our collaboration has ties to the planning in 1999, it is also deeply rooted in the founding mission and vision of this place. In 1967, a new nonprofit was established called Merry Lea Nature and Religious Foundation. Our initiatives display a continuity that will guide our plans for the future. 

ABOUT MERRY LEA

Merry Lea was created with the assistance of The Nature Conservancy and through the generosity of Lee A. and Mary Jane Rieth. It is owned by Goshen College. The center provides a comprehensive program of environmental education and recreation.

The Merry Leaflet, published in spring, summer, fall and winter, provides news about programs and developments at Merry Lea. Jennifer Halteman Schrock is its editor and the author of articles without bylines. See the news tab at goshen.edu/merrylea for more news.

TEAM MEMBERS

Chad Agler
Building Manager and Grounds Assistant

Luke Gascho Executive Director

Kerry Goodrich Property Supervisor

Carol Good-Elliott
Environmental Educator

Tom Hartzell
Coordinator of Undergraduate Programs

Krista Freel Environmental Educator

Bill Minter Director of Land Management

John Mischler Director of Agroecology

Ruth Mischler Asst. Professor, SEED

Dave Ostergren
Director of the Graduate Program

Joel Pontius Director of Sustainability Leadership Semester

Ellie Schertz Assistant Farm Manager

Jonathon Schramm
Assoc. Professor, SEED

Jennifer Halteman Schrock
Communications Manager/MCCN

Katie Stoltzfus
Public Program Coordinator, Educator

Marcos Stoltzfus Director of Environmental Education Outreach

Maria Tice
Admin. Assistant / Volunteer Coordinator

Jon Zirkle Farm Manager

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Executive Director Announces Retirement Plans

How do you know the right time to retire? Luke Gascho, Merry Lea's executive director, has asked this question of friends.

"You'll know," they replied.

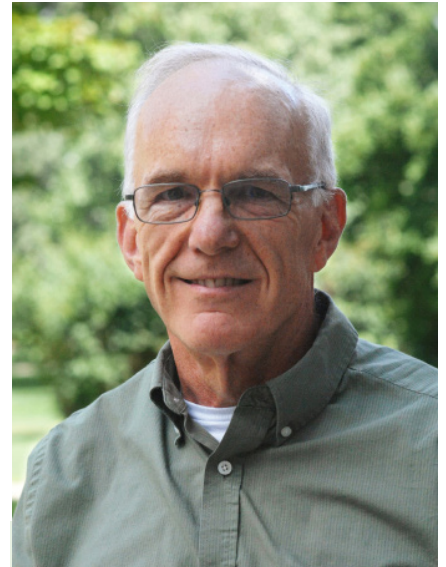
Luke, who turned 66 this fall, says he has a strong internal sense that it is time to let go of leadership at Merry Lea. He announced his intent to retire on June 30, 2019.

"I'm grateful to have such an amazing team—and know you will carry on the mission well," Luke told his seventeen colleagues. Team members were sobered by the news.

Like many grandparents, Luke and his wife, Becky, look forward to spending time with grandchildren who live at a distance. Luke will also enjoy wood-working, photography, gardening and nurturing his orchard. He plans to continue reading about his professional interests, which include ecology, leadership, faith and the intersections between them. He may do some writing on these themes as well.

"My work has allowed me to grow in each of the areas I'm interested in," Luke says.

Members of Merry Lea's board are working on succession plans. 



Dr. Luke Gascho

More Staff Transitions


Jane Litwiller ended her employment as an environmental educator at Merry Lea September 30 in order to welcome a new baby to her family in October.

Jane first came to Merry Lea as an intern in the fall of 2006. She returned as an employee in May 2010. In addition to teaching pre-K through 12th grade programs, Jane maintained and organized many pieces of equipment and provided attentive care to Merry Lea's two snakes. We are confident that Jane's empathy,

her sense of responsibility and gifts as an educator will make her a great stay-at-home mom.

Chad Agler arrived in August as the building manager and grounds assistant. Chad is a Noble County native who currently resides in Columbia City, Ind., with his wife and child. He grew up on the shores of Bear Lake—one of the lakes that borders Merry Lea. Chad enjoys working with his hands and has prior experience in maintenance at Bear Lake

Camp and the Noble County Jail. When he has free time, Chad enjoys fishing, traveling, friends and family.

Krista Freel brings experience as both a classroom teacher and a business owner to her role as an environmental educator. Through Great Minds Tutoring and Mentoring, she served local students in pre-K through high school. Krista and her family enjoy camping and gardening together. They live in Churubusco, Ind. 



Jane Litwiller



Chad Agler



Krista Freel

New Kinderforest Programs Reach 350 Students



A child in Goshen College's Lab Kindergarten writes in a nature journal during a Kinderforest program.

by *Marcos Stoltzfus*

An initial year of success

Kinderforest. Forest Kindergarten. Kinder-Forest. ForestKinder. These were the search terms I was using in December 2016 to uncover more about the most recent trend in nature-based education for young children. The principal at the local elementary school had asked for help getting a new outdoor initiative started for their students, and the request turned out to be outside our typical program style. While the terminology and approach were novel enough to warrant a fair amount of research, luckily it was grounded in our area of expertise: providing positive experiences for children in nature.

Starting with that first inquiry, the Environmental Education Outreach team at Merry Lea embarked on a journey that has pushed us to explore new ways of interacting with students. Our first year of Kinderforest consisted of two kindergarten classrooms visiting Merry Lea 10 times over the course of the year, in all months and weather. Students ven-

ured off-trail, climbed trees, built toad homes and convinced us all over again of the value of unstructured time and student-led inquiry in the woods.

Two of Merry Lea's graduate students focused on this program as part of their year-long research project. Through their work, we are confident of the positive impact we have had on kindergartners' learning and growth. We have given students unprecedented access to our environmental resources and seen them developing ownership of a natural place. We also gained staunch advocates for the program in the form of teachers and school administrators.

In September 2018, this commitment was recognized when Principal Robby Morgan and Teachers Nancy Duffy and Jodie Jordan of Central Noble Primary received the Joe Wright Recognition of Excellence Award from the Environmental Education Association of Indiana.

Year Two and Beyond

Our second year of offering Kinderforest expanded the program in several signif-

icant ways. Because of a district realignment, the number of kindergartners in our partnering elementary school doubled. Nonetheless, we invited them all to experience Kinderforest, so 80 students will each visit Merry Lea 10 times. This year we are serving more kids, training more teachers and exposing more Merry Lea graduate students to this unique approach to pedagogy.

All this activity did not go unnoticed by other area educators. After Merry Lea offered a Kinderforest Showcase highlighting our program in the spring of 2018, other schools have followed suit. The Lab Kindergarten faculty at Goshen College approached us, and we agreed to jointly implement a Kinderforest program in Goshen using the college's 18-acre Witmer Woods as a program site. Districts in Noble and Kosciusko Counties have started forest school programs of their own variety. West Noble Primary students in Ligonier and Washington STEM students in Warsaw will each be visiting their respective school district's wooded lots for recurring, immersive, nature-based program days. In addition to relying on their own teachers' leadership, they have partnered with local organizations like Chain O' Lakes State Park to help support them.

Last year at the outset of the program, we worked with 2 classrooms and 30 kids. This year, we estimate that 17 classrooms and 350 students in our region will experience some programming similar to Kinderforest!

Reflections

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the trend is that much of it lies beyond Merry Lea's direct reach. From the outset of the original Kinderforest program with Central Noble School District, we intended to eventually shift program administration and instruction from Merry Lea to the school. We reasoned that if teachers and administrators built their capacity to run the program on their own, it would increase the long-term


[See Kinderforest, page 5](#)

own, it would increase the long-term viability of the program.

Similarly, I am personally encouraged to see that as other districts have implemented their versions of the program, they have felt empowered to do so independently. To me, this indicates that environmental education is accessible to everyday teachers! While I believe Merry Lea is an important resource for Kin-

derforest programs, I find it noteworthy that we have not become the gatekeepers for kids spending time in the woods.

While delivering Kinderforest programs, we've experienced challenging days and logistical hurdles as we do with any other school-based offering. But despite this reality, I have been impressed by how much interest this program has attracted, how readily others see the value it

provides, and how quickly newcomers become dedicated to its implementation. These days, my questions about Kinderforest are less centered on which search terms to use. Instead, I wonder how it may grow in ways wholly unexpected. I can't wait to find out. 

Marcos Stoltzfus is the director of the Environmental Education Outreach Team at Merry Lea.

Autumn Public Programs

Sorghum, Seeds and Farm Fun

People of all ages came to the Merry Lea Sustainable Farm October 12 to learn about sorghum production and seed saving. Farm tours and a home-cooked meal rounded out the afternoon. Here, Assistant Farm Manager Ellie Schertz takes care to remove sorghum from the heat at just the right temperature.



Enchanted Forest

Merry Lea's most popular public program drew 186 children and adults despite rainy weather the last weekend in October. Students in the master's in environmental education program and other volunteers prepared for their roles by reading up on the animals they would portray.

Left to right: Sarah Gothe, Andrew Beal and James Austin confer with Jonathon Schramm, their natural history professor, before heading out to their habitats. They are playing a toad, great-horned owl, snapping turtle and skunk.



International Volunteer Hones Agricultural Skills



Deus Okong'o, a yearlong volunteer with the International Volunteer Exchange Program experiences a Midwestern snowfall.


When Deus Okong'o looks ahead in life, he hopes for a plot of land where he can grow vegetables and share his knowledge of agriculture and environmental education with other Tanzanians.

These goals are part of what brought him from Dodoma, Tanzania, to Merry Lea for a year with Mennonite Central Committee's International Volunteer Exchange Program (IVEP). The exchange attracts young adults interested in building understanding across cultures.

Deus began volunteering at the Merry Lea Sustainable Farm in August and is donating a full year of his labor in exchange for the opportunity to learn more about sustainable farming practices—and himself. This is his first time away from Tanzania for an extended period and his first time to visit a different continent.

As he reflects on his time at Merry Lea's farm, Deus is struck by the respect shown for all living things. "Even insects are important to the ecosystem," he says. He's also learned more about recycling and composting practices.

In return, Deus brings training and insights from his own country. As an undergraduate, Deus majored in environmental disaster management, studying problems such as climate change and decreasing rainfall. Deforestation due to the demand for firewood, charcoal and building materials is a related problem in Tanzania. In November, he had the chance to describe the effects of climate change in his country to a group of concerned pastors.

Deus would like North Americans to know that it is poverty, not lack of initiative or desire that limits what some members of his nation can achieve. 

At Home in Noble County: Our Nearest Town

Wolf Lake Provides Residents a Satisfying Life



Many Wolf Lake volunteers provide baked goods for a cake walk at the Onion Days festival that takes place each August.

Merry Lea is located a mile or two south of the town of Wolf Lake, an unincorporated village that straddles Route 33. About 2,000 people live within five miles of Wolf Lake.


In the spring of 2018, Laura Hochstetler, a Goshen College student, focused her senior thesis on the town. She'd gotten to know residents of Wolf Lake while participating in Merry Lea's Sustainability Leadership Semester and was curious to learn what life in a small, rural town was like for them. Laura interviewed 23 people who lived in or near Wolf Lake about the strengths they perceived in their community and the challenges they wished they could change.

Laura's paper notes that Wolf Lake residents had much more to say about strengths than challenges. A tight-knit community and the presence of local leaders they respected topped the list of strengths that residents named. Many valued a quiet, rural life or access to nearby lakes. The most frequently men-

tioned challenges were lack of a sewer system and the need for a restaurant or other community hub.

Here are two opportunities outsiders might use to get to know this distinctive town:

Onion Days: In the early 20th century, onions were the crop that grew best in the muck soil surrounding Wolf Lake. An annual festival in early August celebrates onions with a parade, a Miss Onion Days contest and other community events. Merry Lea contributes a booth and environmental education activities.

Luckey Hospital: This community hospital operated from 1930 to 1957. Many local residents were born there. It is now maintained as a museum that showcases health care as it was practiced in the first half of the 20th century. Collections include an iron lung, cooling board, period nursing uniforms and unique bedpans. Open by appointment only. 

for sustainable approaches to natural resources. She has a vision for a series of retreats that could integrate the two. One example is a workshop in which an herb garden also functions as a prayer labyrinth, and the physical tasks of weeding and harvesting become metaphors that embody the tending needed for a healthy spirituality.

Benjamin came to the SLS by way of a formative year on a Christian Palestinian farm in the West Bank. During this gap year following high school, he saw the farmers' dedication to their land.

"I learned a lot about water conflicts and land conflicts. I learned that the environment can be something that divides us or something that brings us together," he said.

While he considered studying ecology, Benjamin chose theology as his field because he realized that his faith was what really fueled him. The option of incorporating sustainability into his theological degree was part of what drew him to AMBS.

What new insights have the AMBS students gained from the SLS so far? For Rianna, prior experience as a canoe trip leader for adventure-based youth ministry deepened her encounter with the Elkhart River Watershed during the SLS canoe trip.


"We've always used the land as a backdrop for relationship building or Christian formation or another purpose. Here on this trip, the focus was on actually paying attention to the land and river. It made me realize how I had previously objectified the landscape for my own purposes," she recalled. Taking an intimate look at one watershed has also given her a desire to put down roots in a particular place.

Benjamin mentioned exercises in the semester's Faith, Ethics and Ecojustice class that pushed him to wrestle with values. "We don't often think about why we care about something. Nor do we spend time thinking about what our place is in mak-

ing change. Luke challenged us to think about what sustains me, what is driving me to do the work I do, and how I relate to others in that," he said.

A point of integration for Benjamin and Rianna is the problem-solving project they are completing as part of an SLS course. The couple is working together on a curriculum for a weeklong summer experience for church youth groups that will focus on the local community and sustainability. They are fleshing out an

idea that originated with a group of local pastors who are committed to bringing the idea to fruition.

Imagine churches all over the country with pastors who see creation care as an integral part of the Christian faith. Imagine leaders of Christian organizations who have a repertoire of ways to connect with their local communities. The AMBS—Merry Lea partnership will continue to work toward this vision. 


Meet the SLS Undergrads

This year's undergraduates are all from Goshen College. Students from any major are welcome.

Rheannon Starr is a junior American Sign Language major from Merriam, Ind., just ten minutes from Merry Lea.

Skye McKinnell is a senior environmental science major from Salem, Ore., who also enjoys history.

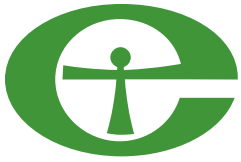
Lydia Dyck is a junior biology major from Durham, Ont., whose appreciation for nontraditional classrooms comes from a lifetime of homeschooling.

Mandira Panta is a junior sustainability studies major from Katmandu, Nepal, who has also worked at Merry Lea as a farm intern. 



Sustainability Leadership Semester students and their professors create a trail of unique group photos. They encountered the painted elk above at the Wellfield Botanic Gardens in Elkhart, Ind. The SLSers toured the gardens during their canoe trip in September.

Back row, left to right: Dr. Joel Pontius, Rheannon Starr, Dr. Dave Ostergren.
Front row: Benjamin Isaak-Krauss, Skye McKinnell, Lydia Dyck, Dr. Jonathon Schramm, Rianna Isaak-Krauss, Mandira Panta.



Merry Lea
*Environmental Learning Center
of Goshen College*

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Events

Learn more at:
goshen.edu/merrylea

WOMEN'S WINTER WALK

WHERE: Merry Lea Farmstead Barn Site

WHEN: Saturday, December 8, 8:30 AM - 11:00 AM

Gather with other women for a time of wonder, reflection and discovery. Part of the morning will be spent walking together in the wilderness, stopping to read aloud the words of women authors. Indoors, we will gather for a time of reflection. Rediscover the healing power of natural spaces and of women in community. Coffee and light snacks will be provided. Dress for the weather.

COST: \$10/person. See our website to register by December 7.

FARM DUMP CLEANUP

WHERE: Meet at 2860 South 575 West, Albion, IN

WHEN: Saturday, December 1, 1:00 PM - 5:00 PM

Join students in the Sustainability Leadership Semester as they help remove an old farm dump on Merry Lea's property. Come be an archaeologist, explorer and forest restorer! A hot meal will be provided at the end of the day.

COST: No charge. See our website to register by November 28.

FRIENDS OF MERRY LEA DINNER

WHEN: Saturday, April 6, 4:00 PM - 8:00 PM

Save the date; details to follow. 