

The Merry Leaflet

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

First Cohort of Undergraduate Sustainability Majors Graduate

THESE ARE WEIRD TIMES.

Classes, environmental education, team meetings and projects have gone online. Instead of zooming to and from offices at Merry Lea, we are Zooming each other in our home-living spaces.

Despite these ongoing and often jarring changes, two things remain constant: gratitude and hope.

On April 15, dozens of people from Goshen College, Merry Lea, and the surrounding communities gathered together virtually over Zoom to witness a presentation delivered by the Sustainability and Environmental Education Department's (SEED) first graduating cohort.

Faces appear on a screen like a Brady Bunch extended family reunion.

"You made it! This has been a long time coming for you all and the department. And you are living proof that making the world a better place is possible," Luke Gascho, retired Merry Lea Executive Director, praises the four students as audience members continue to log on.

The students give their heartfelt thanks and remarks. Their faces show a mixture of relief, anxiousness, sadness, happiness, but gratitude most of all shows through.

The four graduating seniors in SEED are José Chiquito-Galván, Lydia Dyck, Gabe Stoltzfus Miller and Mandira Panta. They all majored in either sustainability studies or sustainable food systems and completed the senior capstone class together this past semester.



Mandira Panta raises her paddle with other members, including **Lydia Dyck**, on the 2018 SLS canoe trip.

The capstone entails a semester-long project. They chose to conduct an energy assessment of Reith Interpretive Center for the newly developed City of Goshen's Department of Environmental Resilience. This digital meeting was their culminating presentation about their project.

The little box on Zoom containing Dave Ostergren, interim executive director and the capstone professor to these four students, says, "It was fascinating to watch you all pivot from going to Reith Interpretive Center each Monday morning, meeting everyone in person, to this virtual world where we can be in our pajama bottoms all day long."

These are weird times.

But if anything is to be gleaned from Dave's remarks, it's that this cohort has demonstrated resiliency time and time again.

"They are the first students to go through the majority of what we designed for these new undergraduate majors," said Jonathon Schramm a SEED professor, in a later interview.

Both of these sustainability majors were created during these students' sophomore year of college. SEED became a new department that built upon Goshen College's

interdisciplinary model and Merry Lea's immersive residential semesters: the Sustainability Leadership Semester (SLS) and Agroecology Summer Intensive (ASI). Students in SEED take courses in biology, economics, entrepreneurship, environmental science, ethics, policy and more.

"Because the field of sustainability is so broad, students must find a direction and hone their passions with some assistance," continued Jonathon. "Now, not only have these four students grown confident in their ability to talk with diverse stakeholders, but they developed the communication skills to be approachable and creative in the types of community solutions they create."

In addition to being mentors and learners alongside the students, each instructor in SEED has a shared goal of cultivating hope.

"Seeing the passion and competence in these graduates as they come through the program has instilled more hope in the future for me than I ever expected or was aiming to inject," said John Mischler, SEED and biology professor and Director of ASI.

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FROM THE INTERIM DIRECTOR'S DESK
DR. DAVE OSTERGREN

Spring brings the new and familiar

GREETINGS FROM MY HOME OFFICE,

The rain soaked my dog and me this morning on our walk through the Rieth Interpretive Center woods here in Goshen. It was a nourishing rain: not warm, but not too cold, slow and gentle. It soaked the ground deep down and bathed the roots of flowers and the unimaginably vast complex of tree roots. I miss going to Merry Lea, but I am enjoying my surroundings.


I go down once a week to make sure “nature is doing alright.” Nature is just fine. Flowers pop up with a burst of color, the neighborhood birds perch or fly through with quick songs, trees and shrubs bloom, and gardens start to take shape promising familiar and extraordinary flavors.

Spring is not canceled. A graduate student reminded me that amid all the cancellations and postponements, interrupted school or work, families being separated or forced together, and other tragedies known or experienced: spring is not canceled. In fact, spring rushes upon me with surprises and delights.

Spring is new and familiar all at once. Among all the seasons, I like spring for its promise. Spring says, “Here we go,” with new adventures, long days, warm walks and drawn out evenings that turn to nightfall unnoticeably. And somehow the added sunshine helps me tackle projects that laid dormant through the winter. I am renewed.

Merry Lea is renewing, too. The trails are open for all to enjoy, and more hikers have emerged, enjoying the outdoor haven we provide. Prairies have been burned and are already greening. In early May, six goat kids joined Merry Lea Sustainable Farm and the farm team is planting summer vegetables. Even with many unknowns we anticipate graduate students in July and school children in fall. We are preparing now, because spring is not cancelled! It brings the new as well as the familiar.

An exciting development is that we have a new executive director. Jason Martin will join us July 1. We are very pleased to welcome him and the promise of his leadership to Merry Lea. Like the season of spring, he will bring new perspectives even as we pursue the familiar programming that you have grown to enjoy and count on from Merry Lea. We thank the search committee and Merry Lea Board of Directors for their hard work and long hours.

I close with thanks. My tenure as interim executive director is winding down. I could not have completed this year without a wonderful and gracious group of people to share the work, burdens and joys. My deepest thanks to all of you. And honestly, I look forward to ‘just’ directing the graduate program and chairing the Goshen College Sustainability and Environmental Education Department. But for now, I get to stay and see what spring will bring. 



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 operated 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. Elena Fischer 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
- Kaeli Evans**
Farm Manager
- Elena Fischer**
Environmental Educator / Communications
- Krista Freele**
Environmental Educator
- Kerry Goodrich**
Property Supervisor
- Carol Good-Elliott**
Environmental Educator
- Tom Hartzell**
Coordinator of Undergraduate Programs
- Bill Minter**
Director of Land Management
- John Mischler**
Director of Agroecology
- Ruth Mischler**
Assistant Professor, SEED
- Dave Ostergren**
Interim Executive Director & Director of the MAEE
- Joel Pontius**
Director of Sustainability Leadership Semester
- Jonathon Schramm**
Associate Professor, SEED
- Jennifer Schrock**
Leader of MCCN
- Eric Shaffer**
SEED Recruiter
- Marcos Stoltzfus**
Director of Environmental Education Outreach
- Maria Tice**
Administrative Assistant / Volunteer Coordinator
- Katie Tipton**
Public Program Coordinator

BOARD MEMBERS

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- Ex Officio: Ann Vendrely*
- Ex Officio: Dave Ostergren*

Unexpected reciprocity gives way to mutual gratitude.

The four seniors thank professors, mentors, Goshen College staff and other members appearing on their digital screens over Zoom.

The audience members mute their devices in anticipation of hearing the cohort introduce their project. And our computer screens fill to show the start of their PowerPoint.

The students start by outlining four goals they had for the capstone semester: connect with diverse stakeholders, develop skills that will be useful in the future, tangibly address community sustainability through action and have some fun.

“This wouldn’t be sustainability if we just saw this as a school project,” Lydia remarked while describing the goals.

And it certainly was no ordinary school project. They did not conduct this project for just a grade, only to walk away. This cohort developed and implemented a plan that the city of Goshen can incorporate within their Climate Action Plan for 2021. This Climate Action Plan will inform how Goshen will achieve carbon neutrality by 2035.

The carbon neutrality resolution was passed in 2019, and this cohort’s model

of conducting energy assessments for city buildings will be used by the Department of Environmental Resilience.

Also called an energy audit, the purpose of the assessment is to understand when, why and how much energy the building is utilizing. Each student participated in the review, calculations and analysis of the building’s current and historical energy consumption. They identified and measured key areas of energy use: lighting fixtures, windows, appliances, and heating and cooling units to name a few.

The students seamlessly bounced between data and overall implications. They discussed the costs of each utility and recommended simple, low-cost improvements for the building’s current design. And they did so while illustrating how the field of sustainability is interdisciplinary and socially relevant.

Calculating the dollars that energy consumes is pretty straightforward. But how do you measure the social cost of carbon – the true costs or consequences of using natural gas or burning coal? These students successfully generated the numbers that accounted for such social and environmental expenses.

Health care, water resources, air pollution, living wages, land management – all are on the students’ minds as they analyze data, investments, savings and returns.

Comments from the audience appear on the chat, congratulating this cohort on a presentation well-done. Individuals unmute themselves and audibly clap or express their joy in being part of this journey.

“This report and presentation help justify what we’re doing, why it matters, what the dollar incentives are all about, and why it’s important to carry on,” says Aaron Sawatsky-Kingsley Director of Environmental Resilience, at the end of the presentation. “You’ve created a face for this process that is helpful to the city and the general public.”

The students reciprocate their thankfulness for Aaron’s guidance and partnership. This project allowed them to wrestle with and craft a common language of economics with community members.

Gabe expounded upon this, saying, “It is important to talk about the typical frameworks that portray investments as bad or good. People are going to ask questions like, how is this going to hurt my business? How much will utilities cost?”

A common language for a common purpose.


Lydia defines sustainability as: “It’s like economics. But instead of it being the science of scarcity, it is the science of abundance. It is a positive vision of moving forward.”

In a later interview Dave said, “From my time interacting with this cohort, I’ve learned that the passion of young people has infinite potential to make positive change. And from these interactions, I continue to grow and live and receive positive energy from these students who willingly take on the hard work of social change, who see the potential of and believe in the goodness of people.”

Their ability to incite action and embody goodness was apparent through this project presentation. Witnessing each student develop their individual passions and articulate them through this project was a key highlight for Jonathon.

“Any last comments from the cohort?” Dave asks.

Mandira remarks, “Thank you so much for your support throughout these four years, this semester and especially now. These are weird times.”

But they are also hopeful times, as embodied by SEED’s first graduating class. 



Gabe Miller works in the fields at Merry Lea Sustainable Farm.

Reflections from the SEED Cohort Graduates



José Chiquito-Galván

Sustainability Studies Major

Participated in Sustainability Leadership Semester

"Toward the end of SLS, I was standing in the Learning Center display room and had a sudden flashback that I had been here before. It was winter, first grade, Jefferson Elementary - I went on a fieldtrip to Merry Lea. I remember going outside to look for tracks in the snow to make plaster casts, and here I was again as a college student.

Doing SLS my sophomore year of college allowed me to use that experience as a source of inspiration and knowledge within the context of other class projects or papers. SLS allowed me to more strongly identify as a Midwesterner and an environmentalist within the context of the Elkhart and St. Joseph watersheds. That sense and experience of who I was made me prioritize my involvement in environmental or sustainability efforts on campus."



Lydia Dyck

Sustainability Studies and Biology Major

Participated in Sustainability Leadership Semester

"This one day from my SLS experience really stands out to me.

We, Joel Pontius and the SLS cohort, put down our shovels and stretched sore back muscles after having spent the day hauling bricks to the hill behind Washtenaw - one of the buildings at Reith Village. We sat back and looked over our hard work. The large circles of furrows now held bricks, removed by canoe and recycled from a broken-down building structure in the woods near Luckey's Landing. We placed them into the earth to form a labyrinth. It faces the pond: a symbol that it was placed intentionally to honour this space. I remember an incredible feeling of completion, that we had all worked really hard to design, plan and execute a project of regeneration - a legacy we were leaving at Merry Lea. This was an experience of what regeneration in our places can look like."



Gabe Miller

Sustainable Food Systems Major

Participated in Agroecology Summer Intensive

"This constantly blows my mind: as a society, we overproduce food in this country. On one ASI fieldtrip, we visited a food bank in the region. Seeing pallets upon pallets of food goods being unloaded from a semi-truck stuck with me. I've unloaded bags of moldy apples from trucks for food banks before, which reinforces this narrative of scarcity: that we're scraping the bottom of the barrel, and this is all we have left. But in reality, a lot of good food goes to waste.

Goshen College and SEED infuse interdisciplinary learning, and ASI certainly helped me explore the connections between different disciplines. After going through these programs, all frameworks for thinking about society are altered. If you understand how the U.S. food system works, it will connect to everything else you know of policy, social justice, racism, journalism, business and more."



Mandira Pantá

Sustainability Studies and Biology Major

Participated in Sustainability Leadership Semester

"If I had to describe this whole undergraduate experience, I would say, 'falling into the river.'

The canoe trip during SLS connected me to water in so many ways. No one really expects to fall into a river, even when you are on a boat. However, when you do fall, you're brought into this other world for a split second, and when you come back up the world is not the same again. On the last day of the canoe trip, we all looked into the horizon and I felt an equal amount of terror and awe. It's terrifying how vast the world is, and yet inspiring that our tiny ripples can create a wave.

We give a piece of ourselves to everyone and every experience that touched our hearts, but we also take with us a piece of those things we have chosen to love. What I choose to take with me is the humility, joy and passion of the professors in their work, for the land and in inspiring us. We can truly change the world."

Environmental Education Goes Online

“FINALLY, IT’S SPRINGTIME.”

Upbeat music commences as Charis McPhee, graduate student at Merry Lea, dances briefly in front of the camera. After a few seconds of introduction, she dives into a lesson about identifying leaf-less trees by looking at buds and twigs.

Usually during this time, school buses are unloading dozens of PreK-12 students at Merry Lea’s various programming sites. Every Tuesday through Friday from late March to mid-May, Merry Lea’s educators are busy hiking the trails, discovering pond critters and investigating glacial formations alongside school children.

Now, in the reality of a global pandemic, faces of the graduate students and Environmental Education Outreach (EEO) Team appear on videos, announcing that spring is here. They encourage individuals and families to investigate those budding signs outdoors.

Many students are tackling online lessons provided by their classroom teachers, otherwise known as eLearning. So, Merry Lea’s EEO team is engaging in E.E.Learning: or Environmental Education Learning. These short videos can supplement eLearning lessons across various grade levels and state standards.

Each Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday a new E.E.Learning lesson is revealed on Merry Lea’s social media platforms and website. These videos and activities are available for families as well as teachers to share with their classes online.

“This cohort has done an excellent job all year of embracing challenging assignments and situations,” says Marcos Stoltzfus Director of EEO and the graduate instructor for teaching practicum. “Using video as a teaching medium has allowed them to pursue topics of personal interest and really flex their creative muscle.”

The EEO team and graduate students have expanded beyond the core curricula typically provided by Merry Lea and have brought gardening, native pollinators, composting and micro hikes to the limelight.

Bringing nature to audiences digitally allows any and all people to experience nature-based education. Some activities can be



The 2019-2020 graduate students are creating videos and accompanying activities as part of their teaching practicum this season.

done in nearby parks, along sidewalks, backyards or in the kitchen.

“In my first video I found a bat in a Merry Lea trail shelter! I love when you find something so cool when you are least expecting it,” says Krista Freel, a Merry Lea environmental educator.

Even though she misses teaching and listening to children’s discoveries in person, Krista mentions, “I love nature and I enjoy sharing that love with others.”

Sharing connections with nature is just as important now within the coronavirus era as it is during a normal programming season.

Although Merry Lea educators are learning or honing existing skills in video-making, video-editing and lesson plan-building, interacting with outdoor spaces in person is still irreplaceable.

“Doing online environmental education has held up an interesting mirror to our ‘normal’ work,” says Marcos. “I have a renewed appreciation for the value of children and adults connecting to ecosystems and their inhabitants through authentic and firsthand experiences.”

“An audio file of frog calls simply cannot replace the deafening cacophony of the real thing,” he adds.


Despite these realizations, there is community in this time of online learning and social distancing.

A Facebook group for the families of current Nature Preschoolers was created by Merry Lea’s co-teachers at the Cole Center Family YMCA in Kendallville. Teachers share at-home activities and resources; Merry Lea Environmental Educator Carol Good-Elliott reads stories for the kids, and parents share photos of their preschoolers exploring outdoors.

One parent posted a far-away photo of their child sitting underneath a tree in the snow. The preschooler was well-equipped with snow gear, pencil and paper.

The parent captions the photo, saying their son asked if he could go outside to sit and draw his observations from under the tree.

Instilling curiosity and connection to surrounding physical places is a goal of Nature Preschool.

Photos are posted frequently on the Facebook group page of Nature Preschoolers showing their Merry Lea outdoor classroom to their parents and families. Seeing kids take initiative and ownership of “their space” certainly demonstrates the long-term effects of early childhood nature-based education. Even despite online learning. 

Life Goes on at Merry Lea

PROGRAMMING, CLASSES AND WORK

at Merry Lea may look different, but one thing remains the same: spring has sprung.

Trillium, spring beauties and mayapples dot the forest floor along the trails. Trees are flowering or already growing leaves. Tadpoles and fairy shrimp are swimming in the vernal ponds.

But if you hike the trails at Merry Lea or visit Merry Lea Sustainable Farm, you might encounter short, blackened grasses and decomposing logs that look charred or slightly ashen.

Evidence that our property and land management teams have successfully completed another season of prescribed prairie burning.

To learn more about these changed landscapes, we had a conversation with Director of Land Management Bill Minter about why prescribed burning is a common practice.

What is a prescribed burn?

There is a detailed process in conducting a prescribed burn. Guidelines must be developed (called a prescription) that describe the necessary weather, temperature, humidity and wind conditions for a safe and effective burn. More preparations must happen like obtaining permits, training personnel and creating firebreaks.

Why burn prairies?

Many prairie seeds lay dormant in the soil during the cold of winter. The fire brings light and warmth (from the darkened burned ground), which encourage these prairie plants to grow. Some prairie plant species have seeds with hard outer shells – or hard seed coats. When that seed coat is heated, it opens up and the seed inside can easily germinate or grow.

Fire also stimulates root growth, resulting in plants that have longer, deeper roots. The deeper the roots, the more drought-resistant the plant. Deep roots are able to get to water and nutrients kept deep in the soil and do not have to rely mostly on rain.

Root growth stimulated by fire contributes to the carbon cycle. Carbon is stored in soil, vegetation and oceans. When plant

matter is burned - like dead leaves - carbon dioxide is released into the air, which can become greenhouse gas emissions. However, prescribed burns increase the soil's capacity for storing that carbon. When dormant prairie grasses are burned, more carbon is stored in the soil than is emitted. This happens because of the fire-stimulated root growth.

Prairies are a natural part of the Indiana landscape, and fires suppress woody vegetation that can compete with prairie plants. Traditionally, lightning strikes caused fires. Later, Native Americans burned parts of the landscape to favor grazing animals they hunted. Indiana receives enough rainfall to support trees, so a prairie that is not burned or mowed will eventually become forest.


Why discourage tree growth in favor of maintaining prairies?

Part of Merry Lea's mission is to provide a natural sanctuary for northern Indiana's native plants and animals. This requires managing the land to ensure this objective. Meadows, prairies, oak savannas and oak woodlands are maintained to hold back the woody vegetation. This increases the diversity of plants and wildlife, thus the overall biodiversity of Merry Lea's landscape. Burning is a natural process that is introduced to enhance these prairies.



White false indigo at Luckey Prairie with purple flowers (Ohio spiderwort) in the background.

Due to the overall loss of habitats throughout Indiana, maintaining prairies is necessary to ensure the survival of native species that rely on these habitats.

Come on out to hike and see the thriving wildlife and plant communities at Merry Lea! Maybe you can spot Bill's favorite prairie plant: white false indigo. 



Various prairies were burned on Merry Lea's property in early April, including the South Kesling Prairie units at the Farmstead.

Announcing Merry Lea's new Executive Director

WE ARE PLEASED TO WELCOME

Dr. Jason Martin as Merry Lea's new executive director! He brings over 10 years of programmatic leadership across environmental services and environmental education programs. Jason will begin his tenure at Merry Lea on July 1.

For the past four years, Jason has served as senior project manager and ecologist for Kleenco Maintenance and Construction in Alexandria, Ind. This involved managing multiple teams and projects across the Midwest for wetland mitigation and green infrastructure construction. His experience in teaching collegiate courses and directing the NestWatch citizen science and education program at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology will translate well to Merry Lea.

"Jason has a passion for environmental education and Merry Lea," says Goshen College Academic Dean Dr. Ann Vendrely. "It is clear that he has provided environmental education to diverse audiences and will be a great ambassador for Merry Lea and Goshen College."

Jason follows David Ostergren, who served as interim executive director after Luke Gascho retired in summer of 2019. A search for a permanent executive director in early

2019 did not result in a hire. The process began again in fall of 2019 by a new search committee comprised of previous and new members.

The search committee included representatives from Goshen College administration and faculty, Merry Lea Board of Directors, Merry Lea staff and the community at-large. Representing Merry Lea staff was Coordinator of Residential Undergraduate Programs Tom Hartzell. Both Vendrely and Hartzell commend how effectively and positively the team worked together, reinforcing partnerships in the process.

"Whether working with kids on a trail, helping undergraduates excel in a classroom or pitching the benefits of rain gardens to corporate executives, he has demonstrated aptitude and dedication to teaching others about the natural world," says Tom.


Also on the search committee was Colleen Banta, a representative from the Merry Lea board and community. She remarks how Jason is well qualified in his management style, experience and educational background, but he also shows "an excitement, true appreciation and commitment for Merry Lea," she says.



Photo courtesy of Jason Martin

"Jason clearly demonstrated an authentic desire to know and understand the place, the organization and the staff," Tom adds.

Martin is a 1998 graduate of Ramapo College of New Jersey, where he majored in biology. He received a master's degree in natural resources and environmental science from the University of Illinois and a doctorate in wildlife ecology and conservation from the University of Florida. He currently resides in Warsaw, Ind. with his wife Suzanne, a 1995 Goshen College graduate.

Welcome to the Merry Lea team, Jason! We're excited to see what the next chapter holds. 



Editor's Note

DEAR READERS:

I am delighted to bring you this new, but familiar spring issue of *The Merry Leaflet*. I recently stepped into this new role as communications specialist in conjunction with my current position as environmental educator.

I first arrived in August 2019 as an environmental educator and a seasonal recruiter for the graduate program.

This is my first issue of *The Merry Leaflet*, and I look forward to continuing this long tradition. I am honored to share and capture stories about the Merry Lea community and all those who contribute to this place.

Thank you for being part of our supportive Merry Lea family as a Merry Leaflet reader. I hope you enjoy this spring season and find renewal in these times of change.

—Elena Fischer,
Environmental Educator and Communications Specialist

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This saves trees, saves us money and simplifies your life.

Our Trails are Open!

Our eight miles of hiking trails remain open to the public, dawn to dusk every day of the week.

Not only is outdoor activity good for mental and physical health, it is also allowable under state and national orders, and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines. Visitors are welcome to hike the trails as long as they do not exhibit COVID-19 symptoms and maintain at least six feet of distance from other visitors. Please avoid touching man-made surfaces. Trail maps are available online at goshen.edu/merrylea/visitor-information



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Events

Learn more at: goshen.edu/merrylea

Stay tuned on Merry Lea's website for upcoming events at goshen.edu/merrylea/category/event. Our team is committed to providing quality public programs and is currently assessing best practices surrounding coronavirus (COVID-19) protocols and guidelines to ensure the health and safety of staff and participants. We look forward to holding future in-person programming and will update our website as decisions are made. **Thank you for your support and understanding!**