

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



(Left) A girl peers into her insect net for bugs (Right) Two girls make "muffins" in the Nature PreK outdoor classroom

Nature Fest is Back with New & Familiar Fun

"I'M NEVER EVER LEAVING!"

exclaimed one girl confidently as she baked muffins in the Nature Preschool outdoor classroom with a friend beside her. They studiously mixed ingredients of leaves, mud and pine needles together and scooped the batter into muffin tins. As they traded cooking skills, they kept remarking about how they want to stay in this classroom forever.

One of the parents nearby chuckled as they recall how their child didn't even want to come to the outdoor classroom at first, fearing it would be like "school."

On Saturday, May 15, Merry Lea hosted the annual spring celebration Nature Fest, filled with facilitated and self-guided activities for individuals and families to participate in throughout the morning and afternoon. One such activity was the Nature Preschool classroom open house, where members of the public could explore the space on their own: climb logs, build shelters, cook in the "kitchen," dig for treasure, paint rocks and more.

Nature Fest featured a new event alongside the family-fun festivities: a BioBlitz occurred Friday evening and throughout Saturday. A BioBlitz is a citizen science effort where teams of volunteers record as many species as possible in a given area over a short

period of time. Jonathon Schramm, professor of sustainability and environmental education and director of the Institute for Ecological Regeneration, coordinated the BioBlitz events, expert volunteers and Merry Lea staff. This BioBlitz "featured quick surveys across multiple taxa and parts of Merry Lea to get a snapshot of some of the biological diversity present at the moment," explained Jonathon.

Nature Fest brought together the local community for outdoor exploration in various capacities: from first-time visitors, to long-time volunteers, to former Merry Lea team members.

To kick off the BioBlitz, scientists, volunteers and Merry Lea staff recorded frog species by listening to their calls and searched for salamanders around the Learning Center on Friday evening. The next day began at dawn with individuals surveying for birds around Luckey's Landing and High Lake.

As the main events of Nature Fest occurred Saturday at the Farmstead, former Merry Lea Program Director Dave Miller led two Goshen College undergraduates into Thomas Woods across the wetland, hoisting large insect

nets over their shoulders and carrying backpacks full of jars and data sheets. They spread out in a section of the woods and swept their nets across the ground, turned over logs and collected insects in their containers with leaves.

Just a short hike away at Merry Lea Sustainable Farm, a troop of young girls practiced their own sweep netting skills outside of the education garden, led by graduate student Jaime Webb. They marveled at a ladybug precariously perched on a blade of grass and closely inspected the bugs temporarily caught inside their jars.

Across Thomas Woods in Kesling Wetland, former Merry Lea Environmental Educator Jane Litwiller and a volunteer scooped for pond critters in their hip and chest waders. Nearby on the dock, kids and adults had their own nets or spoons, dipping for dragonfly nymphs, damselfly nymphs, tadpoles and other creatures.

As families and individuals trickled in to participate in guided hikes, loose parts play and BioBlitz activities, a bell echoed throughout the area. This sound marked a new species that someone saw and

see [Nature Fest](#), page 3



VIEWS FROM THE CORNER OFFICE
DR. JASON MARTIN

Marking the Passage of Time

I WAS RECENTLY REMINDED by Joel Pontius, director of our Sustainability Leadership Semester, about the importance of marking the passage of time. This past year was frustrating, scary and at times heart wrenching. The shadows of disconnection and isolation loomed large. **But here at Merry Lea, this past year was also rich with opportunity and innovation, and I find it encouraging to reflect on this time.**

As I write this article, I am 26 days shy of my one-year anniversary as executive director. Many people have commented to me that they couldn't imagine taking on this role during a pandemic, but I can't imagine any better time to do so. The global experiences of isolation were lessened at Merry Lea thanks to the genuine care that our team has for each other and the collective commitment to our mission. This lattice of mutual affection and professionalism is what makes our organization so strong and enabled us to navigate this shadowed year with strength and grace.


Whenever a coronavirus-related roadblock appeared, the Merry Lea team always figured out a way around it. When most local schools decided to cancel field trips, our Environmental Education Outreach team created new schoolyard-based and virtual programs. In response to coronavirus safety concerns, we instituted protocols for our Sustainability Leadership Semester that protected the health of our undergraduates while ensuring that they still had a deep and enriching educational experience.

As the shadows of the pandemic lessened over recent months, the happy meadows of Merry Lea once again filled with life, laughter and learning. And in yet another demonstration of resiliency, our team embraced our recent Nature Fest event as an opportunity to innovate and incorporated several new facets, such as biodiversity monitoring activities. The result was one of our most well-attended Nature Fests ever!

Nature Fest was also a great culmination of our 2020-2021 environmental education graduate program. We celebrated this cohort's adaptability and successes, and sent them off as masters in environmental education to foster connections between people and nature wherever they go. These students will always be my first master's cohort – something I find meaningful and will always cherish as part of my first-year experiences.

Today, the Merry Lea Sustainable Farm is bustling with students beginning their journey in the Agroecology Summer Intensive program and we are hosting several undergraduate students conducting ecological research projects. Summer is off to a bright start!

In addition to marking the end of my first year as executive director, June 30 also marks the end of our fiscal year. **The Merry Lea community's support through the pandemic has been overwhelming: we have received 212 financial gifts to date, the most in any single year of our existence!** It would be difficult to do what we do without your generosity. Will you consider helping us reach our goal of 250 gifts by the end of June to support environmental education and ecological preservation? Please consider donating at goshen.edu/merrylea/donate.

As I look back on my first year at Merry Lea, I could not be prouder of what our team has accomplished, and I look forward to the bright years to come. I hope that you will continue to join us on this journey. 

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 updates.

TEAM MEMBERS

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Farm Manager

Elena Fischer

Communications Specialist

Kerry Goodrich

Property Supervisor

Carol Good-Elliott

Environmental Educator

Tom Hartzell

Coordinator of Undergraduate Programs

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Executive Director

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Kaitlyn Sproles

Environmental Education Outreach Coordinator

Marcos Stoltzfus

Director of Environmental Education Outreach / Assistant Executive Director

Maria Tice

Administrative Assistant / Volunteer Coordinator

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identified. A white board stationed by the check-in table was a central location for members of the public to write down what species they found throughout the day and then go over to ring the bell, signaling a new species recorded.

After the program, a survey was sent out to participants for feedback. One person wrote, “[It was meaningful] being with others who value and celebrate our natural habitat. I liked how kids were encouraged to identify species, add them to a publicly viewable white board, and ring the bell for any species new to the list. The kids clearly enjoyed that.”

“I really enjoyed watching so many folks come out and join us for the day,” said Environmental Education Outreach Coordinator Kaitlyn Sproles. “Some people lived close to Merry Lea, while others drove over an hour: it was a fantastic diversity of visitors.”

Kaitlyn completed Merry Lea’s master’s program in 2017, and participated in Nature Fest back then. “When I was a graduate student, we were just in charge of a small portion of Nature Fest so we could do our small program and then be a participant in the rest of the activities. It was a lot of fun to actually run Nature Fest.”

All day long, birds sang, kids exclaimed at what they found, canoe oars splashed in the water and the bell tolled: all markings of a successful day. But there are other metrics for reflecting on the outcomes of Nature Fest as well.



Kids interact with Merry Lea’s resident goats and goat kids during Nature Fest.

88 participants traversed Merry Lea, canoeing, taking guided hikes, making nature crafts, exploring with scavenger hunts, petting baby goats and surveying plants, insects and birds. 21 volunteers helped the entire event run smoothly, from leading stations to checking in guests. Because 15 of those volunteers actively participated in the BioBlitz events, they could also be considered participants, thus raising the count to 103 people: the largest Nature Fest ever!

Nature Fest was also a culmination of various Merry Lea program areas coming together: the farm, graduate program, Nature Preschool, biological research and other teams cross-pollinated in ways that gained a broader exposure to different audiences.

Not only was the BioBlitz fun for experts and curious onlookers alike, but over time, these quick inventories will help Merry Lea better understand who is living across our 1,189-acre preserve, potentially informing “our management

planning to better capitalize on hotspots of diversity,” said Jonathon. “I’m really grateful to this year’s volunteers for helping us start this off so well.”

The best measure of success, however, are the experiences of everyone involved. One participant wrote, “Letting my kids hangout in nature and having outdoor activities to entertain them so I can enjoy spending time with them without having to create the experiences myself [was something I valued].”

For Jonathon, “my favorite moment was probably at the end of the amphibian survey on Friday night. As [Merry Lea Executive Director] Jason Martin and I walked back towards the Learning Center with only the last faint glimmer of the day’s light to guide us, we passed through a large patch of trillium, whose white flowers shone like candles in the gathering dark. The effect seemed to magnify their numbers on the forest floor - it was truly a sublimely beautiful sight that I won’t soon forget!”

Thank you for your support

Thank you for donating to Merry Lea this quarter. Your support has contributed to environmental programming, maintaining facilities and upkeep hiking trails.

- Kathryn Aschliman
- Roy & Connie Bender
- Suzanne Beyeler & Jason Martin
- Allan Campbell
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- Heather Gabel
- Jessica Gotwals & Brian Sutter
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in memory of Carl Deimling
- Jay & Patricia Smith
- Kaitlyn & Michael Sproles
- Evelyn & Roger zumFelde

Thanks to those who gave to the Merry Lea Goat Baby Shower.

Your gifts have supported Merry Lea Sustainable Farm and in raising the new goat kids!

- Twila Albrecht & Matt Nafziger
- Trisha Handrich & Chase Snyder
- Heather & Hamilton Harwood
- Jan & Tim Lehman
- Beth Mettler
- Bill & Sally Smith

Graduate Students Promote Environmental Justice



Keila Flores

Keila Flores knew she wanted to be in the environmental field ever since she went to the Florida Keys for a high school marine biology class. Later as an undergraduate student majoring in environmental and marine science at Goshen College, she collected data for various internships and research projects. It wasn't until she interned with an ocean conservation education program that she realized how education is just as important as research science.

Keila entered the graduate program to focus her marine biology degree with environmental education through her yearlong project: an individual project each graduate student designs based on their interests to investigate a topic or practice in environmental education. Keila wrote and taught curriculum on coral reef ecology to fifth graders at Bethany Christian Schools.

She taught the same class for an hour for four days. "Every time I came back, they were super excited to see me," said Keila. "One kid brought in their stuffed whale from home to show me!"

Keila created a 3D print of a coral polyp (a structure that helps coral get food) and applied a paint that changes color with heat. She poured hot water over it to demonstrate coral bleaching with the class: a reaction of coral becoming stressed due to changes in the environment.

But these phenomena might feel disconnected for a fifth grader in the Midwest who may not have ever visited the ocean, let alone seen a coral reef. Keila bridged this geographical gap by introducing watersheds. The students completed activities that demonstrated how water moves across land, emphasizing that what we do in our watershed impacts other waterways – including coral reefs.

Keila chose to teach elementary students largely due to her own journey with marine biology, realizing how inaccessible this field is to many students. Keila found her passion for marine biology later in her school career, in late high school, so she wanted to introduce students to this field earlier. Her high school marine biology class was also an expensive extracurricular course with travel to the Florida Keys.

"One of my big goals for my career is to make marine biology more attainable for everyone, to be more inclusive overall."

"[Diversity, equity and inclusion] is important for me as someone in marginalized groups. Growing up, I never saw someone like me in environmental science." Many of Keila's marine biology classes and internships were led by the same kinds of people. In addition, internships in the field are often unpaid, which creates another hurdle for marginalized people. Keila now incorporates environmental justice into her teaching philosophy. "Merry Lea modeled that and made me comfortable in voicing my own concerns about diversity."

This passion for inclusivity led Keila to accept a position with an organization providing environmental education opportunities to people of color. Keila will head to Hurricane Island off the coast of Maine to teach at a summer leadership camp on environmental and marine science to middle school and high school students.



Fen-Alexander Mihalik

Growing up, Fen-Alexander Mihalik spent most of their time outside building forts, kayaking or catching bugs. As an outdoor educator, they enjoy sharing this safe space with others.

"I enjoy teaching outside because of the opportunities," said Alex. "You never know when a frog or cool insect will come by." One day while helping with Merry Lea's after school program, Alex encouraged students to eat some dandelions that they found. "Kids learn a lot by being able to do their own exploration," said Alex. "The curriculum is like 60 percent [of the learning] and 40 percent is the acquired experiences of seeing, feeling, observing or noticing something."

Allowing students to drive their own learning initially caused Alex some anxiety at the beginning of the year. During the month of March, the cohort traveled to Ol' Morani Ranch near Portal, Arizona, an organization developing a sustainable ranching system. They taught high school students in STEM education and students in grades K-8 from a one-room schoolhouse. Teaching in Arizona was a challenge, being an entirely unfamiliar place to Alex. But they found small, familiar things to ground them, even if they didn't know exactly what a certain plant or animal was. "It was humbling. I had to start at the basics."

After that trip, they came back to Merry Lea and jumped right into spring practicum to teach *Trees are Terrific*. "It was the first curriculum where I was like, 'Wow, I can do this.'" Alex was able to interact seamlessly with the teacher, students and chaperones throughout the program and not feel nervous or anxious.

"I have a lot more confidence. I'm learning that it's okay to not know everything."

This transition for Alex mirrors their experiences with their yearlong project as well. Their project centered around a restored sedge meadow at Merry Lea: a seasonal marsh dominated by various species of sedges, a grass-like plant. Alex had never heard of this ecosystem before arriving at Merry Lea. Since restoration efforts began in this area in 1991, reed canary grass was removed and native plant seeds were planted. This current sedge meadow is no longer being actively restored, so Alex catalogued if the removal of reed canary grass was successful and if biodiversity increased. They collected data from various transects within the habitat, surveying the plant species to compare with data from previous plant studies done by a Goshen College undergraduate student in 2015-2016.

"Now that I had all this fun data and knew what a sedge meadow was, I wanted to do something with it." Alex created a website about why sedge meadows are important and how to get landowners to care. The website includes main points from Alex's research, additional resources, and federal and state programs that provide monetary incentives for landowners to restore wetlands on their property.

Making the unfamiliar more familiar is a recurring theme throughout Alex's journey. Over the next year, Alex will work with yet another new landscape: Indiana Dunes National Park. As an outreach coordinator, they will work with schools, facilitate program logistics, teach summer camps and more. And when encountering unfamiliar plants, Alex can rely on what is now a very familiar mantra from their yearlong project: "Rushes are round, sedges have edges and grasses have nodes from the knees to the ground."



Danilo Rodriguez

More than ten years ago, Danilo Rodriguez first joined the environmental movement as an environmental education intern at a National Wildlife Refuge in California. He was hooked and later served as a habitat restoration intern. However, Danilo couldn't help but notice that he was the only person of color in both cohorts. "I didn't think anything of it," he said, but that observation remained in the back of his mind.

Following these experiences, Danilo moved to New York City and worked in the hospitality industry as a concierge. Nine years later, he decided to get back into environmentalism and joined the Peace Corps as a community environmental education volunteer in 2020. Again, Danilo observed that he was one of nine people of color in a group of 46 people. This surprised him that a decade later, diversity in the environmental field was still low.

Unfortunately, due to COVID-19, his cohort was evacuated from Panama after three weeks. Danilo then found Merry Lea's graduate program and pursued these personal questions about diversity and representation in environmental organizations through a reflective yearlong project.

Danilo investigated what factors or barriers account for this lack of diversity. He researched the historical context of environmentalism and conducted surveys of various workers in the environmental field to get their perspectives on diversity. In his research and survey findings, he refuted myths or ideas that people of color aren't interested in conservation. He interviewed people in environmental leadership positions and attended an environmental conference's diversity panel, informing his perspective on how

"climate justice is racial justice. They are so intertwined," he said. "You can stand up for someone who doesn't look like you and help the environment. They go hand in hand."

Danilo mentioned how he "didn't have people of color in [his] own personal life," as role models in environmental fields. Last fall, the graduate students took a trip to Indiana Dunes National Park where he saw people of color as interpreters. "That gave me hope...I want to be in an elevated position to shed light on stories that people don't know about." Now Danilo will be one of these interpreters, working as an interpretive naturalist intern at the dunes for a year.

Growing up in South Bend, Ind., Danilo noticed how streets, cities and other places are named after indigenous peoples and tribes, but he never learned about them. "As a person of color...highlighting voices that haven't been heard or stories that haven't been told...is important to me."

Danilo's journey in environmentalism along with the confidence and leadership skills he gained in the graduate program inspired him to pursue interpretation. The Arizona trip "gave me confidence that I can teach anywhere in the world. I can teach a student group or sector completely different from what I'm used to," reflected Danilo.



Jaime Webb

Jaime Webb was hardly new to Merry Lea before joining the graduate program. As a Goshen College undergraduate, they participated in bird banding, a Maple Scholars project on mosquitos, and various environmental classes held at Merry Lea.

Jaime graduated with an art minor, but they never thought about teaching art before becoming a graduate student. They viewed activities like ephemeral art—a type of art that produces temporary artworks, often utilizing natural objects like rocks or leaves—as professional artwork. It wasn't until they learned how to facilitate it at Merry Lea that they looked for ways to use art outdoors to empower students.

Since then, Jaime has combined their background in environmental science and art as teaching tools throughout various school programs. They incorporated ephemeral art during field trips, after-school programs and Nature Fest, and even volunteered to write the Art and Nature homeschool curriculum in late April. Co-designed with Keila, participants went on a morning hike and gathered natural materials to use to create art in the afternoon as a reflection of what they witnessed on the trails. Students constructed their own paint brushes with sticks and leaves, made color palettes, ground dandelion flowers to make yellow paint and more.

For their yearlong project, Jaime explored how art can be used as a participatory activity to help foster connections between nature, sustainability, students' cultures and environmental justice. "Due to my own experiences as a marginalized person, I wanted to address social justice through art education," they said.

They created a 12-page curriculum that offered immersive and holistic environmental education to marginalized students in high school. Because most high schoolers in public schools don't have access to both outdoor and liberal arts activities, Jaime implemented their research in environmental justice toward this audience.

"Rather than making an artwork to get people interested in [the environment], how can I get people to make artwork to care about this?"

said Jaime, explaining the intent behind their curriculum.

They implemented a portion of their curriculum for 14 juniors and seniors from Goshen High School, conducting a hike and biodiversity study and art activities at Rieth Interpretive Center. "I was excited to hear their discussions of human and natural communities," how humans are not separate from nature, but interconnected. Jaime enjoyed how "every student is doing something different, even when they're doing the same activity, they try different things and connect with it in different ways." Students reflected on their own backgrounds or life experiences that relate to nature, even if they don't often go outside.

Students were not only engaged in the ephemeral art, but also in the discussions afterward as they shared what they made and reflected on the day's activities. "I found in my background research that when you use art in teaching, it makes different connections or allows them to think in different ways, [forming] deeper connections" across subject areas.

"I really enjoy curriculum development," reflected Jaime, noticing how much they enjoy coordinating program logistics and taking more leadership roles. It's one expression of making "diversity, equity and inclusion a priority for programming."

A Devoted Visionary

WHEN ANDY RIETH WAS A YOUNG

boy, he would often spend a week at his aunt's and uncle's house on the lake with his close cousins. They would wake when the sun came up, swim and fish all day long, and run through acres and acres of the wooded land.

But before they could jump in the lake, his aunt would make him and his cousins go around the property and identify each tree in a journal. "Of course, being 8 or 9 years old, that was painful," Andy says with a grin. They would examine the trees' bark, leaves and surrounding areas for identification clues. His aunt then checked their journals before rewarding their work by letting them loose: free to play and swim.

"Now, I appreciate what a cool thing it was and what she was trying to do," reflects Andy.

This aunt who taught and coached her nephews to develop an appreciation for the environment was Mary Jane Rieth, Merry Lea's co-founder.

Her visionary work manifested in significant contributions, from organizational operations to providing funding, making Merry Lea what it is today.

FORMING MERRY LEA

Merry Lea's name is a homonym inspired by the names of our founders, Mary Jane and Lee Rieth. Meaning "happy meadow," it is fitting that Mary Jane's reference would come first.

"Mary Jane was a very outgoing, gregarious person," says Andy. "She had a big smile and she had a very hearty laugh that I remember as a little boy."

When Mary Jane's husband Lee Rieth bought the first parcel of land in 1964, much to her surprise, she became intimately involved in the organization right away.

"Mary Jane bought into and supported Merry Lea," says Bill Minter, director of land management. "She was very active in the business of Merry Lea."

Mary Jane became a member of the board when the non-profit organization was originally the Merry Lea Nature and Religious Foundation. Bill and



Mary Jane Rieth stands outside the Learning Center building surrounded by school children.

former Executive Director Luke Gascho have spent much time in the Merry Lea archives and testify that the record clearly shows her active involvement in stewarding Merry Lea.

Bill describes the detailed finance ledger books she kept and the numerous letters she typed: every single correspondence that Lee sent to outside members was typed by Mary Jane. Luke praises how Mary Jane dictated the minutes of the original Merry Lea board, providing "a very helpful backdrop for getting Merry Lea established." Her organization system and notes helped Merry Lea maintain continuity.

Even though Andy didn't grow up around Merry Lea, he complements these contributions by describing Mary Jane's and Lee's ability to think long-term into the future. "What is going to be here 50 years from now? 100 years?" he explains.

This forward-thinking manifested in many ways for the Rieths. One of which was caring for their own property on Klinger Lake in southern Michigan. They procured and planted native tree species across their 23 acres. Mary Jane also maintained large gardens full of blooming local plant species. Donned in pedal pushers and gardening gloves, or sometimes just her swimsuit, she'd tend

her gardens meticulously. She cultivated naturalistic gardens, as opposed to the neatly manicured English or French gardens.

Andy describes a vivid memory of Mary Jane talking about Rachel Carson's book "Silent Spring." A watershed book that spurred an environmental movement during the 60s and 70s, "Silent Spring" documents the harmful effects caused by synthetic pesticides upon the natural world: from species extinction to human health.

"I remember [Mary Jane] talking about it to me as a little boy...and being passionate about wanting us to care," says Andy. It had an apparent impact upon Mary Jane, using Carson's enlightening words to express her own views of making the world a better place.

Instead of leaving a legacy through children of their own, Mary Jane and Lee saw Merry Lea as "their opportunity to carry on a legacy for future generations," explains Andy.

STEWARDED A VISION

Being able to pursue long-term investments stems from an ability to be a visionary. Mary Jane stewarded Merry Lea by never losing sight of how Merry Lea's ecosystems and programs can

positively impact people—a vision she wholly shared with Lee.

“[Mary Jane] had a passion for education, having children experience nature in the outdoor setting,” says Luke Gascho. This was shared by both Lee and Mary Jane, but Bill emphasizes how “she had a real heart for kids to get involved outside...especially disadvantaged kids.”

Mary Jane’s role on the board was important for executing the vision of Merry Lea. As the Rieths poured passion and money into this non-profit they founded, they shepherded the vision by looking for “institutional connection for synergy,” says former Executive Director Larry Yoder. The Rieths initiated the process of giving the organization to a college that could sustain Merry Lea into the future.

Decades later, this bold vision of aligning Merry Lea with an institution of higher learning continues to provide novel opportunities for Merry Lea to be a place for people to connect with nature: from being an outdoor laboratory for students and faculty, to establishing residential collegiate programs that bring sustainability, agroecology and environmental education to life.

Yet in the midst of donating Merry Lea to Goshen College, Mary Jane’s commitment to the organization remained strong.

Many Merry Lea team members who interacted with Mary Jane mention that

being physically present was important to her. Kerry Goodrich, Merry Lea’s property supervisor since 1980, recalls Mary Jane coming down to plant flowers, clean windows or walk the trails with him. Her affinity for trees led her to fund tree planting projects through state grants or pay for them herself. Kerry estimates that he and Larry planted 10,000-20,000 trees on the property, from oaks to pines to other varieties.

Her support of programming extended well beyond Lee’s death in 1984. Mary Jane was as welcoming and unpretentious as she was persistent in advancing the vision of Merry Lea.

There has to be “some vigor and vitality to keep a vision going,” says Luke. After Lee passed, it was Mary Jane who established long-term funding for Merry Lea. With the resources the Rieths acquired from their Rieth-Riley construction business, Mary Jane set up the Rieth Foundation and set aside other investments to support Merry Lea financially. After she died in 2008, the endowment of her estate went to Merry Lea.

These financial decisions and donations continue to be incredible gifts. “Merry Lea would not be what it is today if it wasn’t for that critical decision,” says Luke. Larry describes how when the banker asked Mary Jane how much money she wanted to put into the foundation for Merry Lea, she said, “Every penny we can get. We’ve got so much to do down there.” Mary Jane

“allowed us to be visionaries and carry out the vision” through the resources she provided, says Luke.

Supporting that strong commitment to Merry Lea’s vision was an equally strong dedication to her husband Lee.

“To know Mary Jane, you have to understand that at the end of the day, she was very devoted to Lee,” explains Andy.

“A big part of her involvement in Merry Lea was because she knew it was a passion of Lee’s and wanted to see his vision continue and brought to fruition,” Andy says. “That was something she saw as his legacy and something they wanted to leave behind, in part because they didn’t have any children of their own.”


This devotion served as a source of strength and tenacity, rather than a limitation of potential.

As renovations were completed on the Michael Yoder Dome and the Farmstead Barn, Luke and Bill both describe how delighted Mary Jane was to see these projects and program potential. Luke says, “But the way she would express it to me would be, ‘Oh, Lee would be so pleased.’”

This nod to her late husband was interpreted by the Merry Lea team as “a signal that we were on the right track,” says Bill. “It might have been different than what she imagined or what they talked about, but we were meeting this larger vision.”

Luke sees this sign of respect for her husband “as a reminder of how they worked together so closely...To [think] about how Lee couldn’t be around to see this but would’ve been pleased,” was a way to honor her late husband.

Both Larry and Luke would visit with Mary Jane throughout the years to keep her updated on the happenings of Merry Lea. They both chuckle as they recall how at the end of their conversations, she would often remark, “Boys, let’s get to work!”

As the Merry Lea team continues the legacy and heritage the Rieths bestowed - to engage people of all ages in learning at the intersections between nature, ecology and spirituality - it’s time to get to work. 

To read the full article, see our website



Lee (left) and Mary Jane (right) Rieth.



Merry Lea

Environmental Learning Center
of Goshen College

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Events

Learn more at: goshen.edu/merrylea

Nature Play Day

WHERE: Learning Center

WHEN: Thursday, **June 10** | 1 – 4 p.m.

Join this family-friendly event designed to get people outside as part of a statewide effort by Indiana Children and Nature Network (ICAN) Nature Play Days! Dip for tadpoles, create a nature craft, go on a hike, work on a scavenger hunt and much more.

Cost is free. Registration not required.
See our website for a schedule and details.

Tales & Trails

WHERE: Various Sites

WHEN: **Last Tuesday each month** | 9 – 10:30 a.m.

Hear a tale and hike a trail with your preschooler to discover the natural wonders around you together! This is a 1.5-hour monthly program designed for children ages 3-5 and their caregiver(s), led by a Merry Lea educator.

Cost is free. Registration not required.
See our website for more details.

Merry Lea Nature Explorers

WHERE: Various Sites

WHEN: **June 16, July 14, August 11** | 9 – 11 a.m.

This program is a brand new experience for elementary-aged students to get outside and engage in the habitats and landscape across Merry Lea. Explore a new ecosystem and uncover the animal and plant residents through games, activities and trail investigations.

Cost is \$3.50 per child for each program.
Registration required on our website.

Goat Cheesemaking Class

WHERE: Merry Lea Sustainable Farm

WHEN: Saturday, **June 26** | 9 a.m. – 12 p.m.

Don't miss this opportunity to work with Merry Lea's animal husbandry expert Ruth Mischler, to take the milk from our resident goats and turn it into cheese. This program is designed for adults. Bring a picnic lunch and meet the goats after the program!

Cost is \$15 per person.
Registration required by June 24 on our website.