

With help, Children and Nature Saratoga renews local efforts

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SARATOGA SPRINGS — As a growing focus on health and reconnecting children with nature emerges at the national level, the nonprofit organization Children and Nature Saratoga is revamping its efforts locally.

Created in June 2008, Children and Nature Saratoga includes a 24-member advisory board, volunteers and an executive director, Ardie Pierce, who promote fun, engaging activities to encourage the health and well-being of children in the community.

The organization hit a funding roadblock a few months ago and went on hiatus, but a new grant from the Saratoga Springs-based Nordlys Foundation will enable it to get back on track and operate a campaign called “Children and Nature Saratoga: Come Out and Play” through June 2011, Pierce said.

The group reconvened at a meeting recently to launch several new initiatives. One is a partnership with Saratoga Hospital and Dr. Anneke Pribis, of the Galway Family Health Center, to design, produce and distribute a “Healthy Kids Rx Pad,” a prescription notepad printed with suggestions like “Go for a 15-minute walk in your neighborhood” or “Make mud pies with your friends.” The pads will be made available to physicians at Saratoga Hospital and other area pediatricians to hand out to their young patients.

“Research shows children who are outdoors and in green settings have improvement in attention span and learning,” Pribis said. “Something like this will actually stimulate the discussion between medical providers and families about trying to get children outside. It’s (also) expanding the concept of wellness from a focus just on diet and exercise, to connecting with the world around you and being out in green spaces, which I think is especially important for kids.”

The group is also revamping its website, <http://childrenandnaturesaratoga.org>, with the addition of a column called “In the Hazel Wood,” written by outdoor writer and journalist Jon Wurtmann, of Saratoga Springs. Local children’s author and advisory board member Jennifer Armstrong will write monthly book reviews. Advisory board member Alex Chaucer will provide a weekly list of outdoor activities on the site.

Leaders in the community are endorsing the grassroots effort by joining the advisory board and representing the group’s partner organizations. Marie Glotzbach of Skidmore College, Katherine Scharff of the Waldorf School, James Bruchac of the Ndashina Education Center, Andy Fyfe of Saratoga P.L.A.N. and Mayor Scott Johnson are among its partners.

“It’s no secret that childhood obesity is on the rise,” Johnson said. “In the age of the Internet and increased computer usage, we have to make sure that the physical and non-technical aspects of our youth aren’t ignored.”

In addition to the city’s existing recreation programs, Children and Nature Saratoga’s programs are another way the city can act as a model for other municipalities interested in promoting health, Johnson said.

And with President Barack Obama’s launch in April of the “America’s Great Outdoors” program, the plan is gaining momentum on a higher level. Obama’s program will use the Environmental Protection Agency and federal departments

to “encourage more Americans to enjoy the outdoors and enhance conservation efforts.”

“With the national emphasis on getting children to connect with nature ... it seems important that we bring this message home to the Saratoga region,” said advisory board member Barbara Glaser, of the Nordlys Foundation. “This project is committed to engaging the community institutions to do what they can to create opportunities for children and families to connect to the natural world.”

The group is planning a family expo in the fall at Saratoga Spa State Park. The event will be open to the public.

For more information and details on other upcoming events, go to <http://childrenandnaturesaratoga.org>.