

## **Our Big *Virtual* Backyard**

In a typical summer, certain Foothills Conservancy staff transform from development professionals and volunteer coordinators into summer camp leaders with all of the accoutrements: belt loops holstering walkie-talkies, name tags dangling on every available arm, and Band-Aids and bug spray poised and ready.

Usually that week of camp is spent exploring the forest, swimming in Lake James, wading through creeks, and showing children creative ways to appreciate their environment by immersing them in nature. These adventures focus on environmental education and STEAM learning, with about 50 children from our eight-county service region participating. The third year of Our Big Backyard looked a little different, but the conservancy, ever resilient, was determined to provide an engaging and impactful summer camp experience, even in the midst of a global pandemic.

At first, conservancy staff weren't entirely sure what camp would look like, but "skipping a year wasn't an option for us," said Associate Director Beth Willard-Patton. "It was important for us to provide *some* type of summer camp experience, and I am so proud of what we produced."

Providing a high-quality camp experience meant dedicating plenty of time to planning, preparing, and making the ultimate decision to convert our in-person camp to a virtual, kit-based, learning experience. Staff and volunteers spent most of spring and early summer designing lesson plans, recording interactive videos, and creating colorful and engaging infographics.

This year, Foothills Conservancy provided materials for a full four weeks of environmental education and STEAM learning to 60 children through weekly kits, packed in boxes donated by Packaging Corporation of America. Kits were handed out in downtown Morganton at the conservancy's office parking lot every Monday in July, and the contents of each box reflected an elemental theme: earth, wind/air, sun/heat, and water.

With help from N.C. Cooperative Extension Burke County Center and the Morganton-based arts advocacy group TOSS, lesson plans included activities that encourage environmental awareness, healthy eating, exercise and art. Children learned through interactive, self-led activities like breaking open a geode, dissecting owl pellets, making sun prints from items collected in nature, creating a human sundial and so much more! After campers completed a project, they uploaded the results from their personal experience to Moodle, an online learning platform. Camp leaders interacted with students through this virtual platform, allowing connections to be made with children even without in-person interactions.

"It was hard not to be hands-on this year with campers as we have in the past," said Development Coordinator Sophie Elliott. "As photo submissions started to come in, we appreciated the various reactions campers had to each activity and the progress they were making from week to week."

Parents and campers alike loved picking up and opening their weekly kits, treating each week's box as a birthday-style surprise. "Listening to the kids try to guess the weekly theme was really

rewarding,” Willard-Patton said. “I was surprised at how quickly they figured it out, and it made me happy to see them so engaged in this way.”

Videos of camp activities can be found on the Foothills Conservancy YouTube channel.