

Stories that Count

Building Climate and Environmental Justice Awareness Through Culturally-Centered Math and Story Trails

by Ashley Brailsford

What does nature access look like for children and families in housing communities?

In what ways can interactive math and story trails bring awareness to environment and climate injustices while uplifting the family and land stories of Black folks in these spaces?

These are the questions I began to ask last year as I thought about a project to propose for the Nature Everywhere Initiative which is being led by Tri County Play Collaborative. The Tri County Play Collaborative is an early childhood partnership between local agencies in Berkeley, Charleston, and Dorchester Counties, South Carolina. The Play Collaborative partners with community cultural institutions, such as libraries, museums, and outdoor organizations to offer hard-to-reach parents and caregivers low- or no-cost access to immersive, culturally-centered experiences that promote early learning and center

play. After two years of providing wonderful programming across our communities, my organization, Unearthng Joy, decided to further align our initiatives to focus on nature and outdoor play.

The Birth of Unearthng Joy

I birthed Unearthng Joy in response to watching my 5-year-old son's sense of wonder and time outside diminish dramatically as he entered kindergarten in the autumn of 2019. When the pandemic closed schools months later and he and I began to spend more time outside (after all, that felt like the safest place to be), his curiosity re-emerged and he began to ask thoughtful questions about the how and why of the natural world. This inspired me to do some research into nature-based education, something that despite my background as an early childhood teacher and teacher educator, I knew very little about. Would



Ashley Brailsford, Ph.D., is an early childhood educator and nature enthusiast who launched Unearthng Joy to guide the development of culturally-centered, nature-based programming for families, community groups, and organizations that center the stories and contributions of Indigenous, Black and other people of the global majority. Her experiences in teaching, professorship, curriculum development, and leadership in education coupled with time spent as an outdoor

guide informs her programming and development process to transform outdoor spaces into cultural places that honor culture, explore justice, and unearth joy.

This is the first of a series on Climate and Environmental Justice and Awareness by Ashley Brailsford, Ph.D. The series will be featured digitally and in the subsequent print magazines. In the meantime, follow along with Brailsford's work at unearthngjoytogether.org and tricountyplay.org.

this, I wondered, be a good fit for my son? Unsurprisingly, the programs I found in our area primarily centered Whiteness both in the teacher and student populations (which were primarily white), and in the way that the curricular content and experiences often failed to foreground or highlight the roles and stories of Black, Indigenous and other people of the Global Majority. The variety of ways that we have led and participated in environmental and agricultural practices in the past and present were absent. As someone with extensive experience supporting educators in learning about multicultural education and culturally-responsive teaching, I wondered: “What does a nature program look like that centers the stories and roles (both present and historic) of Black, Indigenous, and other people of the global majority?” I decided to give it a try, and so, in 2020, *Unearthing Joy* was born.

Unearthing Joy began as a series of gatherings held in a community garden where I had been volunteering. At the start, each gathering involved reading a multicultural nature book and doing an activity inspired by that book. Many of these books came from the carefully-curated lists offered by Social Justice Books, and explored topics like gardening for food justice and the creative arts in nature. Throughout, I documented the process of creating this program and shared this work with friends and colleagues through social media, at conferences, and via workshops and consulting work. Soon, my good friend and colleague Adrienne Troy-Frazier reached out about a new organization she and two other African American early childhood leaders were creating: the Tri County Play Collaborative – and so began our collaboration.

Expanding the Coalition with Nature Everywhere

I learned about the Nature Everywhere initiative while presenting at the Children and Nature Network (C&NN) conference in 2022. Nature Everywhere Communities (a partnership between the National League of Cities, KABOOM!, and C&NN) seeks to increase awareness around, and access to, nature for children in 100 communities across the United States by 2025.

While many previously-funded initiatives focused on access to parks and playgrounds, I found myself wondering what

“What does a nature program look like that centers the stories and roles of Black, Indigenous, and other people of the global majority?”

access to nature might look like in the spaces and communities where our children and families were already living. I am also a big proponent of nature access being aligned with modern developments and children’s interests, including technology. Furthermore, I became curious about how we might leverage technology to engage children and their families in meaningful literacy and math experiences. Over time, my question evolved. I now wondered: How might we engage families and communities in outdoor play through creating math and story trails in their own neighborhoods? That said, the core intention behind the creation of these math and story trails was and is to spark conversation, awareness, and interest in larger conversations around climate and environmental justice.

Under my direction, Tri County Play Collaborative put together a team for the Nature Everywhere initiative that included leaders from the Charleston County Public Library, Math Talk (which creates community-based interactive digital trails in economically distressed communities), and the South Carolina Housing Justice Network (which organizes campaigns to push forward policy changes that prioritize tenants’ and housing rights). After a year of planning together and conducting preliminary demographic and policy scans that helped us shape the work, we finally came together in November 2024.

Partnering with Gadsden Creek

This time, our meeting also folded in community members from cultural institutions (Charleston Stage, and Children’s Museum of the Low Country), early childhood advocacy and child care organizations (including the Beloved Education and Early Care (BEE) Collective and Berkeley County First Steps), and residents from the Gadsden Housing Community. Kenya Cummings and Kanani Burns of the South Carolina Housing Justice Network suggested this community for our first math/story trail given their high rates of engagement and abiding concern for their

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children's ability to play safely outside amidst challenges such as ongoing flooding and a lack of tree cover. At this meeting, residents shared their visions for, wisdom about, and concerns regarding issues at the intersection of the environment, housing, child care, education, general well-being and opportunities for children to play safely in both rural spaces as well as urban housing communities. What we learned was both shocking and motivating:

We learned that Gadsden residents live on a heat island that experiences some of the highest temperatures in the area and that, despite this, all but one tree in the housing community have been removed. Further, residents shared that they are subject to policies that do not permit "gathering" in local greenspaces, and that they become vulnerable to eviction should they choose to do so. Residents also shared about the city's effort to demolish Gadsden Creek, a formerly 100-acre tidal creek located behind the housing community that has since diminished to only 4 acres and is bounded by businesses and high-end housing. Nonetheless, it still plays a vital role in the environmental health and historical memory of the community. For many years the creek and its land and surrounding waterways were carefully stewarded by 16 Black families who had houses along the creek. When the city of Charleston demolished these homes, they replaced them with the Gadsden Creek housing community and turned part of the creek into a landfill. Gadsden Creek's mostly Black residents still contend with high levels of lead and mold due to intentional neglect from the housing

authority rooted in systematic racism. Whatever our next steps, being aware of these histories and current context would be essential.

Looking to the Future

So, when people ask me why I am adamant that we MUST talk about environmental and climate injustices in ways that go beyond park access and nature access for children and families ... THIS is the WHY! It is not just about access, we are literally talking about children's ability to LIVE. It ain't all running through the woods and being free for everyone. It is sometimes just being able to BREATHE. This. Is. The. Work. We are working to honor the right of children to play safely in the outdoors and for their well-being. I continue to be inspired by those around me who are doing this beautiful and hard work everyday.

As our Nature Everywhere work enters its second year I am excited to integrate the family and land stories of the Black residents—stories rooted in resistance and environmental activism—into these math and story trails. The hope of this work is that, with time, we will dream up new ways to resist and eradicate environmental and climate injustices while also actively creating playful and joyful experiences for Black children and families in rural and urban communities across the tri-county area and, eventually, throughout South Carolina.