

Nature helps to heal wounds

By Martha Rounds

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Consider a flock of birds on a telephone wire.

Each bird always leaves space between itself and the birds on either side.

"Fifty birds sit on a wire leaving a large space between each of them; one hundred birds fill the same wire leaving a small space between them," said Jude Aronstein, program coordinator for the Nature Connection (formerly Animals As Intermediaries), a Concord-based nonprofit. "They never crowd each other."

This simple fact of nature provides a powerful metaphor for a small group of students at Concord's Walden Street School. The girls who attend this residential school are there because of severe depression, anxiety, mood disorders and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Like the flock of birds, they, too, must learn to make room for each other and create space without creating isolation. At Walden Street School, they receive daily emotional and educational support. Twice monthly, The Nature Connection brings the metaphors of the natural world into the school.

For the past 25 years, The Nature Connection has brought nature programs to at-risk youth, people with disabilities and elders who have limited or no access to the outdoors. Because many clients cannot go outside, The Nature Connection brings nature to them. In each program, Nature Connection staff and trained volunteers combine seasonal natural materials, live animals, sto-



Photo by Sue Huszar

A student at the Walden Street School checks out an antler during a visit from the Nature Connection.

rytelling and expressive arts to create an indoor habitat that replicates an ecosystem in nature. Each animal or plant acts as a metaphor for the complexity of an aspect of life. The Nature Connection currently serves Walden Street School and Minute Man Arc for Human Services in Concord, along with six other treatment sites in Greater Boston.

"Experiencing nature in a completely absorbed way is what we bring to people who can't get out," said Nature Connection volunteer and Concord resident Andrea White. "We say, 'Here's a sound; here's a feeling; here's a touch.' The ecology and the experience of enjoying the ecology create an opportunity for personal healing."

Beavers were featured prominently in another program that The Nature Connection led recently at Walden Street School. After creating a riverine habitat in the classroom, "we talked about how beavers work as a family to stop water

and build a home," said Aronstein. "We showed the girls materials like beaver-chewed logs and bark and black birch, a fragrant tree they eat. Then we encouraged the girls to work together to build a beaver dam themselves, pushing sticks into clay like beavers push sticks into mud, building a home, saving sticks they like. Not only are the girls learning science, they are applying the metaphors of what they've learned to social skills like cooperation and working together."

For most people, nature is a companion and inspiration often taken for granted: During outdoor exercise, sightings at bird feeders, gardening, car rides, or lying back to look at the clouds. For people who cannot experience the outdoors, The Nature Connection offers the lessons, rejuvenation and joy that spring from the beauty and complexity of nature.

"Everything we do at the Walden Street School requires cooperation, taking turns and

being patient," said The Nature Connection volunteer Martha Wood, of Acton. "For many activities, we need two people. One day we were teaching the girls about what a woodpecker sounds like. We used a block and tapped it hard with a stick on both sides. One girl held the block, another tapped it. No one can do this alone!"

The girls also get very excited about the animals that are an integral part of every Nature Connection program, Wood said. They have learned that they have to calm, quiet and respectful around the animals, and they get an immediate reward.

"One day we brought a dove. She looks so calm when you see her, and then the girls got to hold her," Wood said. "They could feel her heart beating really fast in her chest, and they realized that she might be nervous being held. It was a great jumping-off place to explore how people look on the outside and how we might feel inside."

The girls also enjoy one of The Nature Connection's certified therapy dogs, Jet, a black poodle. "One day, Jet just rolled over and wanted her belly rubbed. Seeing a dog be so affectionate helps the girls feel more that way, too." Another day, they experimented with giving Jet simple commands like "sit" and "down." They began to explore different tones of voice — commanding versus conversational — and could see that Jet responded differently to each tone. It was a great way to begin to think about how they talk to others, said Wood.