

Mother of Invention

Running a House and a Self-Created Business

Nature close to home

marguerite paolino

She looked up and there it was: a beautiful red-tail hawk. Close enough that she could see the detail in its feathers, the grace in its movements. But no one else in the busy park seemed to notice.

No one was looking.

Rachel Rock remembers that visit to the Boston Public Garden as she describes why she founded Puddlestompers. By teaching young children to observe and explore the natural world in their own neighborhoods, she hopes to reach and inspire the parents as well.

"It's just a matter of learning where to look, how to look, and when to look," said Rock, a Newton mother of three who left her job in international affairs and economics to start the educational nature program in 1999.

"I want to connect families to the public lands that are a mere hop, skip, and a jump from their homes," she said. "It turns out that they don't have to go to New Hampshire. I wanted to introduce people to the beautiful spaces in their towns."

Puddlestompers combines Rock's experience as a child with that of becoming a mother. Rock wanted her three children - Isaac, 9, Alexandra, 7, and Gabriel, 3 - to be able to find joy and wonder in nature the way she did as a child. But there was no way she could replicate her own experience of growing up on a 60-acre arboretum. Living in a stone house once owned by a Philadelphia merchant family, Rock could spend her days run-

ning, meandering, and investigating the vast open space around her.

"I thought all kids grew up that way," she said.

Even after moving from densely-populated Brookline to more suburban Needham seven years ago, Rock realized that, despite being "perfectly nice," the family's treeless backyard, wouldn't offer much in the way of nature discovery. When she looked into programs for her children, she found that they often filled up quickly or were further than she wanted to travel with her young family on a weekly basis.

So she started her own program, utilizing the public land that is so often overlooked by those who live closest to it.

Puddlestompers offers on-going, year-round classes for 2- to 5-year-olds and 5- to 9-year-olds. Rock, who continues to direct the program, and her teachers holds additional 90-minute events on Saturdays and offer birthday parties. They have taught in Arlington, Brookline, Medfield, Needham, Newton, and Wellesley.

Natural history underlies the entire Puddlestompers curriculum, but Rock brings the concepts alive with stories and dress up. To learn about the white-tailed deer's enhanced hearing, the children wear Dixie cups with the bottoms cut out over their ears. The image is funny, but the children hear better with them on and understand the advantage the deer's ear-shape gives it.



Rachel Rock

"By taking [the classes] out of the more formal world of environmental education, I feel more comfortable bringing in some non-traditional mechanisms," Rock said. "The kids are captivated by it, and I hope I'm giving the parents some tools and techniques for doing it on their own. Maybe in their free time people are more likely to go for a walk in the woods."

She continues to be surprised by how many people don't take advantage of nature. When she visits area preschools, she often asks how many children dig for worms in their yards. She knows only a few, if any, hands will go up. And that fact still amazes her.

"What is childhood if not digging for worms in your backyard?" she said. "Kids are natural-born scientists. Give them some worms and a bucket of water and they'll be there for hours."

Starting a business-like raising a child-is a labor of love.

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