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# "The Need for Nature: Exploring Youth Leadership Development through Outdoor Activities"

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**“THE NEED FOR NATURE:  
EXPLORING YOUTH LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT  
THROUGH OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES”**

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PIM 70

A Capstone Paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a  
Master of Intercultural Services, Leadership and Management at  
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**Date:**                                   July 20, 2012

## **DEDICATION**

For all of the past, present, and future outdoor enthusiasts.

“Study nature, love nature, stay close to nature. It will never fail you.”

**-Frank Lloyd Wright**

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I'd sincerely like to thank Interfaith Outreach and Community Partners, CONECT staff, Three Rivers Park District employees, and all of the CONECT families. I had an amazing experience working with you and wish you all the best in future endeavors.

Thank you to all of my friends and family who have helped me along the way. I could not have done this without your love and support (and canoe trips and countless “well actually”s)!

Katie Dudley, thank you for your endless hospitality.

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My dearest SIT friends, your passion and courage is my inspiration.

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## ABSTRACT

Youth are increasingly spending more time indoors. A young person spends hours in front of different screens, tuned out to their natural surroundings. When numerous studies have linked spending time outdoors to physical, mental, and emotional health, this increase in indoor time is disturbing. Youth living in apartment complexes in the Western Suburbs of Minneapolis do not have a lot of natural outdoor space close to their homes or transportation to parks, to enrich creativity and promote independence. This paper explores what has been called, the nature-deficit disorder, among youth today, and how one organization, the CONECT (Community Organizations Networking Compassionately Together) program of Interfaith Outreach and Community Partners in Plymouth, Minnesota, has partnered with Three Rivers Park District to help get kids outside.

Leadership and Activities Club is a program for teenagers designed to promote leadership development and learn life skills. Since its formation in 2007, L.A. Club has gone from three members at one site, to over 25 teens participating at three different CONECT locations. L.A. Club members have engaged in a number of community service projects, including those in conjunction with Three Rivers to promote environmental awareness and conservationism. This paper asks, how, and to what extent, do outdoor L.A. Club activities empower youth and increase leadership development among participants.

Along with researcher direct observations, interviews with CONECT staff, and interviews with outdoor recreation specialists at Three Rivers Park District, this paper will illustrate how L.A. Club has increased leadership development among its participants. Parent and member surveys also show how outdoor activities provided a space for members to challenge themselves and develop unknown skills. In conclusion, the youth who participate in the CONECT L.A. Clubs discover the importance of outdoor activities, learn how to become better leaders, and find themselves becoming social change agents in their communities.

## I. Youth and Nature

Nature-deficit disorder is not a medical diagnosis. It describes “the human costs of alienation from nature, among them: diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses” (Louv, 2009). Young people are spending less time outside engaged in creative play, and more time inside in front of a screen. On average, a young person aged 6-11, spends about 30 hours a week in front of a computer or television (Louv, 2009). Older youth spend even more time in front of a screen for academic, recreational, and social reasons. Thirty hours may not seem like much, but when investigating the link between the loss of outdoor play and health issues such as childhood obesity and attention deficit disorders, the numbers are alarming compared with those of forty years ago. Richard Louv (2009), chairman of the Children and Nature Network, co-chair of the National Forum on Children and Nature, and author of several books on the subject, writes:

At the very moment that the bond is breaking between the young and the natural world, a growing body of research links our mental, physical, and spiritual health directly to our association with nature- in positive ways. Several of these studies suggest that thoughtful exposure of youngsters to nature can even be a powerful form of therapy for attention-deficit disorders and other maladies. As one scientist puts it, we can now assume that just as children need good nutrition and adequate sleep, they may very well need contact with nature.

Spending time in nature is important for childhood development because senses are engaged in a way that is impossible indoors. “Playtime – especially unstructured, imaginative, exploratory play – is increasingly recognized as an essential component of wholesome child development” (Louv, 2009). When children spend time in nature they are applying creativity and resourcefulness, skills heavily influential in critical thinking and problem solving. Additionally, spending time outdoors aids in stress reduction and has been a positive treatment for depression.

The loss of outdoor activity is only part of the larger phenomenon of an increase in sedentary lifestyles. According to the World Health Organization, inactivity is seen as a major risk factor in

noncommunicable diseases, which cause 60% of global deaths and 47% of the burden of disease (Louv, 2009). Not only are children being raised indoors, but they are being confined to even smaller spaces; therefore they are moving less. Researchers from the University of Glasgow in Scotland conducted a study where they measured a toddler's movements through an electronic accelerometers for a week. They found that most three year old children are only physically active for about twenty minutes a day! (Louv, 2009) Clearly, the loss of spending time outside is only one consequence of a larger global crisis in which we are becoming increasingly inactive.

Even though youth are spending more time inside, it does not mean that young people are unaware of their natural world. Youth are increasingly becoming engaged with environmental groups and are important activists for issues such as climate change. Yet this knowledge of the importance of nature, does not seem to translate to time spent out in it. “Today kids are aware of the global threats to the environment – but their physical contact, their intimacy with nature, is fading” (Louv, 2009). Youth are now aware of the importance of eating local and organic for health and environmental reasons, but few actually understand the growth process from seed to plant, and even fewer are engaged in farming.

It is critical to address the loss of nature in childhood development and youth activity. During my work with the CONECT program of Interfaith Outreach and Community Partners, I have seen how important it is for young people to have safe, outdoor space in their neighborhoods. Understanding the benefits of spending time outdoors and the consequences of losing it, is crucial to finding solutions and creating better youth programs that incorporate the natural world. Also important is being aware of the social justice component of the loss of nature. Urban, low-income families have less opportunity to spend time in a natural setting, as well as those families living in suburban multi-unit apartments, like the CONECT neighborhoods. When involved in planning and implementing youth programs, this awareness becomes even more essential so as to provide equal opportunities for natural outdoor play.

## **The Benefits of Being Outside**

There are numerous mental, physical, and emotional benefits in spending time in nature. Young people especially can develop their imaginations, creativity and independence when engaged in outdoor play. They are able to experiment with their environment and characteristics of their natural world. As previously stated, young people engage their senses more fully when they are outside and are stimulated in a way that is not as easily accessed indoors. Mary Rivkin (2000), an expert in the field of early childhood development, attests to how important it is for children to spend time outside:

Most children appear to benefit from being outdoors. They like to see what is going on, go someplace, meet and greet other people and animals, experience the infinite and diverse sensory qualities of the world (the smells, the feels, the sounds), and experiment with the “big behaviors”, such as shouting, running climbing and jumping – which are seldom accommodated well indoors.

Spending time in nature is important for early cognitive development. At different stages in our development we require stimulation that being outdoors can provide. Infants and toddlers require sensory stimulation, including “interesting things to look at from a horizontal as well as a vertical position” (Rivkin, 2000). They also need increasing physical opportunity for experimenting with their own bodies. Jane Clark (Louv, 2009), a University of Maryland professor of kinesiology, suggests that a new generation of children is not only being raised indoors, but is being confined to even smaller spaces. She calls them “containerized kids”, because children are spending more time in car seats, high chairs, and strollers instead of being able to crawl and explore their natural world.

As children continue to grow, they increase their social and language skills. “Sociodramatic and individual imaginative play is fundamental to preschoolers' development”, and such play is supported by free time outside (Rivkin, 2000). Elementary age children need outdoor play, much as younger children do. They also need space to sit, read, talk, draw and engage in group activities and sports. It is within this age group that children also begin to emotionally benefit from the quiet and solitude that is

provided in nature.

Erik Erikson, the famous child psychologist known for his developmental stages theory, described the child's need to establish a self beyond adult control, and the importance of building forts, creating hideouts, and having other special places outside the home to turn to in retreat (Louv, 2009). Furthermore, Stephen Kellert, a professor of social ecology at Yale, describes how experience in nature helps shape children's cognitive maturation, including the developed abilities of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation: “a major challenge of childhood is developing the ability to translate and interpret experience by systematically assessing objective, empirical evidence. Indeed, no other aspect of a child's life offers this degree of consistent but varied chances for critical thinking and problem solving – nature is a steady diet for the mind as well as the body” (Louv, 2009). There are countless lessons to be learned in the natural world. Nature provides a tool for children to develop critical thinking and problem-solving strategies.

In addition to practicing the scientific method of inquiry, spending time outdoors can also be beneficial to learning the sciences, natural history, and literacy. John Dewey, famous for his experimental education philosophies, provides us with guidelines to make sure learning is tied in with our daily experience. “If knowledge comes from the impressions made upon us by natural objects, it is impossible to procure knowledge without the use of objects which impress the mind” (Dewey, 2009). If children are to understand natural sciences such as biology, chemistry, physics and astronomy, they need to see the correlation between this knowledge and their daily lives. Children learn from doing, engagement in the material is important for understanding. Being in nature is not the only way to provide active learning, however even very young children can enhance the foundation of their scientific understanding by spending time outdoors. Additionally, referencing written material to something that can be seen, smelled, heard and touched, is beneficial to a child's literacy development.

There are also emotional benefits to spending time outside. Peter Kahn (1999), author of *The*

*Human Relationship with Nature*, found confirmation in over 100 studies that spending time in nature led to stress reduction. Cornell University reported in 2003 that a room with a view of nature can help protect the psychological well-being of children. Even rooms with indoor plants have been linked to stress reduction. Nancy Wells, assistant professor of design and environmental analysis for this Cornell study, said, “our study finds that life's stressful events appear not to cause as much psychological distress in children who live in high-nature conditions compared with children who live in low-nature conditions.. and the protective impact of nearby nature is strongest for the most vulnerable children- those experiencing the highest levels of stressful life events” (Louv, 2009). Children with more nature near their homes reported lower levels of behavioral conduct disorders, anxiety and depression. They also rated themselves higher than those without much nature experience in terms of self-worth. These emotional benefits are incredibly powerful, especially when working with youth.

Nature can also be dramatically healing for people dealing with traumatic events. The Institute for Child and Adolescent Development's Therapeutic Garden in Wellesley Massachusetts won the Presidential Award for Excellence for helping traumatized children. Sebastiana Santostefano, director of the institute explained the importance of the natural world in the healing process. “We have a small hill, a mound- and for one kid at a certain point in therapy it was a grave; for another, it was the belly of a pregnant woman. The point is obvious: children interpret and give meaning to a piece of landscape, and the same piece can be interpreted differently... Landscape [gives] the child ways of expressing what's within” (Louv, 2009).

The power of nature to provide such incredible physical, emotional and cognitive benefits, is clear. As John Burroughs said, “I go to nature to be soothed and healed, and to have my senses put in tune once more.” Yet children are losing their direct interactions with the natural world - why? Of course there is the obvious increase in time spent indoors in front of television, immersed in video games, the Internet, social media websites, cell phones, and other forms of technology. However, an

increase in technological recreation is not the problem. It is beneficial for youth to be fluent in different types of technology, increasing their abilities to navigate an expanding technological world. However, it is the imbalance of indoor recreation and outdoor play that is cause for concern. There is something else that is occurring simultaneously with the rise of indoor recreational time: the increased fear of being outside.

### **The Fear of Nature**

When I was younger, playing outside was an everyday occurrence. My siblings and I ran around our neighborhood with other kids, rode our bikes to wooded parks, built forts, and played imaginative games like “Lost Kids” and various night games. Young people today seem to not have that same kind of freedom to engage in unrestricted outdoor play. Fear has been identified as one of the main reasons parents do not allow their kids to play outside as they did when they were younger. Fear of strangers, traffic, crime, and even the dangers in nature itself, prevent parents from letting their children engage in unrestricted outdoor play.

In a 2002 survey conducted by the TNS Inter-search for *American Demographics* magazine (Louv, 2009), 56% of parents in the United States said that by the time they were ten years old they were allowed to walk or bike to school by themselves; only 36% of those same parents said they would allow their own kids to do the same. Even before the terrorist attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>, parents were worried about their children roaming around the neighborhoods alone. Kidnapping, violent crimes against young people, and even Halloween candy contamination, are overly dramatized in the media, and scare parents into keeping their kids indoors.

David Finklehor, co-director of the Family Research Laboratory at the University of new Hampshire, conducted the National Incidents Study of Missing Children in collaboration with the Justice Department in 1990 (Louv, 2009). “By a wide margin, most of the abductors weren't strangers, but family members or someone the family knew...Finklehor calls the stranger-snatcher epidemic “an

optical illusion” caused by the generalized social anxiety, new coordination between law enforcement and the missing-children groups, and media excitability. Make that media market-driven excitability” (Louv, 2009).

The fear of stranger-danger is more than just kidnapping. Parents are afraid of senseless hate crimes committed against people who are simply outside. In 1998, Washington's Olympic Natural Park reported 82 car break-ins, 47 cases of vandalism, 64 incidents of drug and alcohol abuse, 1 sexual assault, and 1 aggravated assault with a weapon (Louv, 2009). Even my personal experience with running outside was changed by fear of people who might hurt me. In college I used to run in the Endowment Lands of the University of British Columbia. It was so peaceful and energizing to run among the huge cedar trees and breathe in the damp, fresh air. When a female jogger, and marathon runner, was found raped and killed in those same woods, I immediately changed my running path and only went on those trails if I was with another person. Now, even the hint of that type of crime in my neighborhood park prevents me from running there. While there is certainly a need for caution, crime rate is falling in most wilderness parks. From 1990 to 1998, reported robberies in the national parks dropped from 184 to 25, murders from 24 to 10, and rapes from 92 to 29 (Louv, 2009).

Traffic is another huge fear that prevents parents from allowing their kids to play outside, especially unsupervised. An increase in residential traffic, obviously means that children are more likely to encounter cars during outdoor play. In one CONECT neighborhood, there are a large number of kids playing outside at any given time outside the school day. This should be a sign of a healthy neighborhood, in that parents feel safe enough to let their kids play outside without adult supervision. Unfortunately, most of the kids play in the parking lot; they ride bikes behind cars that are backing out, and cross the street without looking. It has become a problem for the property management and steps are being taken to create more concrete rules for outdoor play.

It is not only fear of children getting hit by cars, surprisingly adults are concerned about the

damage children can do to the cars. In another CONECT neighborhood a group of young boys were playing baseball in the parking lot. There is no large green space for them to play and the parking lot is the only option. Balls were hitting the siding of the homes, and neighbors complained that they had to move their cars for fear of broken windows or dents. One neighbor even called the police to complain about the boys. Luckily the situation was mediated at a community meeting, but the boys made a large concession: they would play basketball instead. “Countless communities have virtually outlawed unstructured outdoor nature play, often because of the threat of lawsuits, but also because of a growing obsession with order” (Louv, 2009). This discouragement of outdoor play only pushes kids back inside in front of the screen, the consequences of which are literally life-threatening.

Fear of nature itself is another huge factor in keeping children indoors. There are certainly dangers in the natural world. West Nile Virus carried by mosquitoes, Lyme Disease carried by deer ticks, bites of the brown recluse spider, rattlesnakes, and other predators do exist and both parents and young people should be educated about these dangers. However, the dangers kids face outside are quite small and in general are less than those found inside the home. The Environmental Protection Agency now warns that indoor air pollution is the nation's number one environmental threat to health, it's anywhere between two and ten times worse than outdoor air pollution (Louv, 2009). Mold, bacteria allergens, carbon monoxide, radon and lead dust are far worse than dangers found in the woods outside.

Parent fear of stranger-danger, traffic and even nature itself, has led to a decrease in unknown social interactions. Lynn Henderson, a clinical psychologist said, “people see social interactions as more dangerous than they are. As more parents keep their children inside the house or under rigid control, youngsters will be deprived of chances to become self-confident and discerning, to interact with neighbors, or to learn how to build real community” (Louv, 2009). Richard Louv (2009) asks how this fear of the outdoors will impact our future.

Excessive fear can transform a person and modify behavior permanently; it can change the very structure of the brain. The same can happen to a whole culture. What will it be like for children to grow up in socially and environmentally controlled environments-condominiums and planned developments and covenant-controlled housing developments surrounded with walls, gates, and surveillance systems, where covenants prevent families from planting gardens? One wonders how the children growing up in this culture of control will define freedom when they are adults.

Being outside was such an important part of my childhood and those memories are still cherished. Even the times I was alone outside, climbing trees or just sitting by myself, were moments when I felt totally at peace and happy. It's hard to imagine that some of today's youth will not have the same opportunities to spend time in the natural world.

### **The Consequences of Losing Outdoor Activity**

Nearly 8 million children in the United States suffer from a mental illness; Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is one of the most prevalent (Louv, 2009). According to the American Psychiatric Association, “the essential feature of ADHD is a persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity and impulsivity more frequently displayed and more severe than is typically observed in individuals at a comparable level of development” (Louv, 2009). Children with this disorder have a difficult time paying attention, following directions and focusing on tasks. They may also suffer from aggression and anti-social behaviors.

Prescription drugs, such as methylphenidate (Ritalin) and amphetamines (Dexedrine) are used to treat ADHD. Methylphenidate is a central nervous system stimulant that shares much of the same pharmacological effects as methamphetamines and cocaine (Louv, 2009). The use of these pharmaceuticals increased 600% in the United States between 1990 and 1995; Between 2000 and 2003, spending on ADHD for preschoolers increased 369% (Louv, 2009). Undoubtedly, the increase in prescription drug use for treatment of attention-deficit disorders, comes hand in hand with an increase in our recognition of this disease. Half a century ago, attention-deficit disorder did not exist in the

medical world.

The cause of ADHD is still unknown, although there are a number of studies that link the disease to genetics, diet, and environment. In 2004, Children's Hospital and Regional Medical Center in Seattle published a study that linked ADHD to television. Their study concluded that every hour of TV watched per day by preschoolers increased, by 10%, their likelihood of developing concentration problems and other symptoms of attention-deficit disorders by the age of seven (Louv, 2009).

It's difficult to listen to young people talk about the hours they spend in front of the television, playing video games, without passing judgment. Two young boys I work with confided in me that they hardly ever see their friend since he started playing "Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare", a video game he got for Christmas. The three friends used to go build forts together in the woods across the street from their apartments. When I asked the boy about his new video game, his eyes lit up and he started telling me how cool it is and how much he loves to play it. It was hard to be supportive of something that he enjoys so much because I was worried that he was becoming increasingly anti-social.

A number of the kids living at CONECT sites suffer from an attention-deficit disorder. Recent studies have suggested that spending time outdoors can actually be a useful therapy for ADHD. "Some researchers now recommend that parents and educators make available more nature experiences- especially green places- to children with ADHD, and thereby support their attentional functioning and minimize their symptoms" (Louv, 2009). Being surrounded by green space and engaged in outdoor activities, help children manage their concentration and focus.

Another consequence of losing outdoor activity is childhood obesity. This recent phenomenon is perhaps more related to an increase in sedentary lifestyles than a loss of outdoor play, but it does correspond to an alarming amount of time spent indoors (See Figure 1). According to a recent report by the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, "two-thirds of American children cannot pass a basic physical: 40% of boys and 70% of girls ages six to seventeen, can't do more than one pull-up; and

40% show early signs of heart and circulation problems” (Louv, 2009). According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the number of overweight adult Americans has increased 60% from 1991 to 2000 (Louv, 2009). Additionally, the number of overweight American children between the ages of two and five has increased by almost 36% from 1989 to 1999. Today, approximately 17% of children and adolescents aged two to nineteen are obese (“Centers for disease,” 2011). That corresponds to 12.5 million young people at risk for becoming obese adults and experiencing early death. Obese children are more likely to have high blood pressure and high cholesterol, which are both risk factors in cardiovascular diseases and factors in diabetes and some cancers. Obese children are also likely to suffer an increased risk of impaired glucose tolerance, insulin resistance, breathing problems such as sleep apnea and asthma, joint problems, and fatty liver disease (“Centers for disease,” 2011).

Childhood obesity is simply the result of eating too many calories and not getting enough exercise. There are a number of contributors including: high sugar drinks and less healthy food at home and at schools, a lack of daily exercise, no safe and appealing place to play and be active, an increase in portion sizes, and the already mentioned increase in time spent in front of a screen. (“Centers for disease,” 2011). Most young people fall short of the Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans, a list of recommendations for the public by the CDC. It is suggested that young people engage in at least 60 minutes of aerobic physical activity each day (“Centers for disease,” 2011). When designing youth programs it is important to remember this guideline - and include active components into the program.

### **Social Justice Perspective on the Loss of Nature**

Low-income youth living in urban areas, and many living in suburban neighborhoods as well, oftentimes do not have the opportunity to spend time outdoors. A lack of local parks and transportation barriers means that these youth are isolated from the natural world. When children do play outside, it is often restricted to certain areas. There are neighborhood groups and community regulations that define what is safe, and acceptable outdoor activity (Garvin, Berens & Leinberger, 1997). Finally, if spending

time outdoors is so beneficial, why is it that there is little research on the subject? Is it because outdoor play is free, so there is no profit-driven incentive to look harder at encouraging children to play outside? When looking at the nature-deficit disorder through a social justice lens, it becomes clear that there are many factors at play.

The example of the boys playing baseball and a neighbor calling the police is only one case of how young people's outdoor play has become increasingly restricted. While these boys agreed to play basketball instead, the message was clear: play should be limited to certain spaces designated for specific activities. It is not only neighborhoods that have strict regulations on the use of outdoor spaces. Local governments create city ordinances and zoning laws that restrict what can and cannot be done outside. Richard Louv (2009) looked at some of these restrictions:

In Pennsylvania, three brothers, ages eight, ten and twelve, spent eight months and their own money to build a treehouse in their backyard. The district council ordered the boys to tear it down because they had no building permit. In Clinton, Mississippi, a family happily spent four thousand dollars to build an elaborate, two-story Victorian-style tree house. Five years later, the city planning and zoning department announced that the tree house must be demolished because it violated an ordinance prohibiting construction of an accessory building in front of a house.

Building a treehouse or fort was identified as one of the ways young children develop independence from adults and foster their creativity and problem solving skills. Now it has become illegal.

If there are so many health benefits to spending time outdoors, and huge negative consequences for not doing so, why isn't there more public knowledge about the topic and incentives for neighborhoods to encourage outdoor play? The answer is disturbingly simple. Spending time outside is free. Children don't need any special gadgets or expensive toys to run around in the woods; they simply need the woods. They need the space that is being turned into condos and commercial developments for profit.

A new generation is being raised away from the natural world and therefore away from the

reasons to become environmental stewards and conservationists. If young people have no connection to nature, they will not have reasons to protect it. “The protection of nature depends on more than the organizational strength of stewardship organizations; it also depends on the quality of the relationship between the young and nature- on how, or if, the young attach to nature” (Louv, 2009). By decreasing the time children get to spend outdoors engaged in free, natural play, we are setting them up to devalue the preservation of the natural world. This in turn, spirals into more negative consequences.

### **Youth Empowerment**

Before introducing the study of the Lakeview Commons L.A. Club with the CONECT program of Interfaith Outreach and Community Partners, it is important to understand youth empowerment and how leadership skills are developed among young people within youth programming. Through my coursework at SIT, I learned foundational lessons about how empowerment affects social change. Youth Program Leadership provided insight into the skills and activities young people need in order to feel empowered and become social change agents themselves. How we encourage youth and why we would want to create an environment for them to foster new skills and develop confidence is necessary to understand if we are to look at how outdoor activities relate to youth empowerment.

When discussing the Vermont Governor's Institute on Public Issues and Youth Empowerment, John Ungerleider and Ange DiBenedetto (1997) stated the importance of youth empowerment activities in their programs. They defined youth empowerment as “the process by which young people learn through active participation in the relationships, events, and institutions that affect their lives, to develop and apply their capacity to transform themselves and the world in which they live.”

According to Ungerleider and DiBenedetto, there are three fundamental elements of youth empowerment activities: intellectual challenges, emotional nurturance, and shared power. (Ungerleider & DiBenedetto, 1997) Intellectual challenges can include education and training young people in the necessary skills for critical analysis. Providing a rigorous content within a youth program can help

develop students' ability and confidence to speak their minds and feel valued as contributors to society. Emotional nurturance includes providing a safe space in which diversity is accepted and multiple opinions and emotions can be expressed openly. Creating a place where safety, closeness and mutual appreciation is expected, helps foster emotional nurturance and provides an opportunity for youth empowerment. Shared power is a component of youth empowerment activities that also provides an intellectual challenge and emotional nurturance. The staff at the Vermont Governor's Institute programs assist students in building a community of mutual respect and emotional nurturance by “sharing power with students... by soliciting student input into the development of program policies and activities.” (Ungerleider & DiBenedetto, 1997) When students feel they have a say in their own program, they are more likely to engage in intellectually stimulating aspects of the program, and feel emotionally supported.

Respect is another key component of youth empowerment activities. “Respect is defined as a combination of recognizing youth – who they are and what they do; nonjudgmentally accepting young people's thoughts and feelings; and valuing their decisions and life choices.” (Ungerleider & DiBenedetto, 1997) With this, students can see themselves not only as student leaders, but also as students who can be leaders in their communities, “capable of assisting, influencing, and even leading adults in addressing important local problems with global ramifications.” (Ungerleider & DiBenedetto, 1997) Being respectful of the students, demonstrating trust, and valuing thoughts and opinions can go a long way in youth programs to develop positive capacity building.

Youth empowerment means that young people are contributing their talents and viewpoints for the betterment of their society. It's understood that youth see the world differently than adults. When youth are seen as partners in decision making and are themselves in charge of projects, their sense of ownership greatly increases the chances of successful implementation. “The best environment [values] the reality and experiential base of adults and the creative optimism and energy of young people”

(Curtis, 2008).

Community service or volunteerism is one way for youth to incorporate their own interests, strengths and passions into an empowerment activity. “Youth give several reasons why they participate in service- they have compassion for people in need; they want to do something for a cause they believe in; they believe if they help others, others will help them; and it's a way to hang out with friends” (Curtis, 2008) Service learning projects engage youth in meaningful ways within their own communities. “Service-learning combines academic learning with community service, and requires intentional learning goals and reflection about the experience” (Curtis, 2008). Service-learning projects are unique in that both the server and the served are mutually benefiting; youth are given the opportunity to give back to their communities in a way that is meaningful to them. Service-learning projects, like those done by CONECT L.A. Club members, incorporate the three elements of a successful youth empowerment program as well. L.A. Club participants are learning new things for an intellectual challenge, are encouraged to participate in an environment of emotional nurturance, and are given the freedom to incorporate their own ideas as a form of shared power.

## II. The Study

During my Reflective Practice Phase, in efforts towards earning a Masters Degree in Intercultural Services, Leadership, and Management from SIT Graduate Institute, I entered a year of service through AmeriCorps VISTA. AmeriCorps VISTA is a national service program designed specifically to fight poverty. Today, thirty-seven million Americans live in poverty. AmeriCorps VISTA was founded in 1965 as Volunteers In Service To America; it became part of the larger network of AmeriCorps programs in 1993 ("Americorps vista," 2011). VISTA members commit to serve full-time for one year at a nonprofit organization or local government agency, working to fight illiteracy, improve health services, create businesses, strengthen community groups, and other work to help bring individuals and communities out of poverty. VISTAs generally do not provide direct services, but instead focus their efforts on building the organizational, administrative, and financial capacity.

My host organization, Interfaith Outreach and Community Partners, serves families in the western suburbs of the Twin Cities. My position is with the CONECT program, which provides on-site direct services to families living in seven different apartment complexes in Plymouth, Minnesota. As an AmeriCorps VISTA and CONECT Program Assistant, one of my main duties is to work with youth at these sites. It is through this position that I began to work with the L.A. Clubs and was able to research how, and to what extent, outdoor activities empower youth and encourage leadership development.

As previously stated, I have always believed in the importance of having a strong connection to nature. In my adolescent years I went to a YMCA summer camp, Camp Manito-wish, in Boulder Junction, Wisconsin. When I was 17, I participated in a 64-day canoe trip in northern Saskatchewan with four other girls from camp. This experience proved to be one of the most influential of my life. I developed unknown leadership skills and increased my self-confidence. I realized that the challenges provided in nature could lead to empowerment, and wanted others to share in my experience.

Through my position with CONECT and working with the L.A. Clubs, I have become increasingly aware of the nature-deficit among youth. Instead of playing outside with their neighbors, kids are choosing to sit in front of a computer or television screen by themselves. Kids living at the CONECT sites, don't have a lot of outdoor space and don't often have the opportunity to travel to parks.

For this study of the CONECT L.A. Clubs, in addition to my own direct observations, I have interviewed two recreation specialists with Three Rivers Park District and a CONECT Program Assistant who runs the Lakeview Commons L.A. Club, in order to look at different approaches to outdoor youth leadership programming. I also conducted a survey for parents of the youth involved in our programs and a survey for L.A. Club members.

Research was conducted through a flexible design and included a number of different data collection methods. Recent theory on the nature-deficit was used, but the main focus was on a case study of the CONECT L.A. Clubs. Because my research design was flexible, with some components of a fixed design, and using mostly qualitative data collection methods (the quantitative data was participant information such as number of participants, ages, grades in school, number of years at their current job, etc.), I implemented a triangulation strategy to help with threats to validity.

The nine L.A. Club members who were asked to participate in this study were all involved with the Lakeview Commons club. Of those nine, five were able to participate at the scheduled time. Eight parents were given the survey, and four were returned. There were no incentives offered, and both parents and members were reminded (written and verbally) that participation was voluntary and in no way would non-participation negatively impact their membership in L.A. Club.

The data collected from document review, direct observations, journaling, interviews, parent surveys, and member surveys was compiled and analyzed. The hope is that through this narrative of the CONECT L.A. Clubs, future programming will improve on incorporating more outdoor activities to provide an avenue for youth empowerment and leadership development.

## **Organization Overview**

Interfaith Outreach and Community Partners (IOCP) is a community-based outreach organization that has been serving low-income families for over thirty years (“Interfaith outreach and,” ). IOCP serves clients in eight west suburbs of Minneapolis, Minnesota including: Plymouth, Wayzata, Long Lake, Orono, Minnetonka Beach, Hamel, Medina and Medicine Lake. It was founded as an ecumenical outreach program in 1979 through a collaboration of nine local churches. IOCP soon grew into a direct service provider with a choice-model food shelf, resale shop, and on-site partners such as Wayzata Community Education, the Wayzata School District, Peppermint Fence West, Fathers and Families Network, and Hennepin County.

For the past thirteen years, “the strategic approach has been on providing direct services to foster stability in times of crisis, and on implementing a community wide action plan designed to dismantle barriers associated with poverty” (“Interfaith outreach and,”). This plan identified affordable housing, child care, community connections, transportation, food, and employment as the key barriers that keep families in poverty. IOCP assists about 1,500 families per year and also provides on-site direct services to over 800 families through the CONECT program (“Interfaith outreach and,”). Other services IOCP offers include a choice-model food shelf, resale shop, case management, employment services, and special programs such as holiday adopt-a-family, a birthday shelf and back to school supply distribution.

Housing stability is one of the biggest needs in which IOCP assists families. In 2010-11, Interfaith Outreach and Community Partners helped 473 households with housing-related needs (“Interfaith outreach and,”). IOCP provides emergency assistance to families, whether they are homeless, at-risk for homelessness, need rent assistance, or have a critical home repair that they cannot financially afford. In addition to emergency assistance, IOCP provides extended supportive services for families. These services are critical because when families have safe, stable and affordable housing,

they are free to pursue other life goals.

One of the ways IOCP provides these extended housing services is through the CONECT program. Community Organizations Networking Compassionately Together (CONECT) provides direct, on-site services to families living in eight multi-unit apartment neighborhoods throughout Plymouth. CONECT started in 1995 at Regency Pointe Apartment Homes, now one of eight sites served by CONECT. Other sites include Kimberly Meadows Townhomes, Vicksburg Commons, Shenandoah Woods, Willow Wood, Lakeview Commons, Stone Creek Apartments and in a lesser capacity, Plymouth Colony Apartments.

The CONECT model is such that families are connected to IOCP services directly at their home, thus eliminating the transportation barrier. Staff get to know families intimately, as their offices are on-site, and aid in community building programs such as community dinners, special events, classes and a multitude of other adult and youth programming. CONECT staff conduct yearly community needs assessments and are able to take resident input to create unique programs for each site. The CONECT program also connects families with community resources in addition to those of IOCP and supports youth through Homework Clubs, Leadership Activities Clubs, Camp CONECT and other recreational and academic enrichment programs.

As one of the CONECT Program Assistants, I plan, implement, and assess programming and other community events hosted by CONECT. Through my position, I help build capacity for families living at these sites. One of my main duties is working with youth through Homework Club, Teen Lab, and Leadership Activities Club. Youth success and the reduction of high-risk activities are important goals of the CONECT program for youth living at the eight sites. Therefore programming is often targeted at engaging kids in structured activities within their communities.

#### **L.A. Club**

Leadership Activities Club (L.A. Club) is a program for teenagers designed to build leadership

skills, confidence, and engage young people in their communities. Life skills such as respect, problem-solving, communication and initiative are learned and strengthened through this program. Each L.A. Club has one CONECT staff person and at least one adult mentor. The mentors are community members that demonstrate exceptional leadership skills themselves and role model positive behavior.

L.A. Club was first started at Lakeview Commons in 2007 by an AmeriCorps VISTA member. There were only three members, all of whom were boys, in the first year of the program. This initial group met to volunteer and do fun activities. They also worked through “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens” by Sean Covey. This step-by-step guide, based on his father's book “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People”, helps teens deal with real issues such as academic and social pressure, goal setting, parents, self-confidence, friendships, and other daily struggles faced by teenagers. The seven habits outlined in this book are: be proactive; begin with the end in mind; put first things first; think win-win; seek first to understand, then to be understood; synergize; and sharpen the saw (Covey, 1998). The first L.A. Club met to discuss these habits and work through activities created by Sean Covey. There was only moderate interest in the seven habits approach to L.A. Club and for the future of the program L.A. Club members decided they wanted to do more.

In 2009 L.A. Club expanded membership and developed defined goals and objectives accordingly. It was at that time that Three Rivers Park District adopted a new focus on youth leadership within the parks. Three Rivers Park District was established in 1957 by the Minnesota State Legislature. Since then the parks have become some of the largest wildlife habitat areas in the seven-county metro area. Over 8 million people access 27,000 acres of park reserves, regional parks and trails annually. The mission of Three Rivers Park District is “to promote environmental stewardship through recreation and education in a natural resources-based park system” (“History of three,” 2012). When Three Rivers first sought to focus on youth leadership within the parks, their goal was to collaborate with an established youth program to excite youth about volunteering in the park system and also

interest youth in potential summer employment. Alex McKinney, the Outdoor Recreation Supervisor for the Outdoor Recreation School of Three Rivers, reported how this partnership developed:

Our whole goal was to set-up a year long program that would impact youth a little bit more than that one time [field trip], two-hour experience. And our focus was more environmental based. So, that fit in nicely with what L.A. Club was at the time. They were more humanitarian efforts. At the time we had five or six kids when we first started. Our goal was to get them out in the parks and get them to realize what resources were available to them and to also develop life skills while they were out there.

Twice a month this group participated in activities with Three Rivers designed to build leadership, work as a team, create trust among members, increase self-confidence by pushing themselves outside their comfort zones, and promote environmental awareness.

Three Rivers encouraged L.A. Club members to engage in Service Learning Projects either in the parks or within their communities. Members were challenged to design and implement their own project that incorporated environmental stewardship. The first project was a day-long workshop for CONECT youth (grades 2-6) on the importance of recycling. L.A. Club members led a discussion for the younger kids and taught them how and what to recycle. L.A. Club members included a recycling relay race where kids learned which bins at the apartment complex in which they should put common household items, decorating take-home recycling boxes, and a trash pick-up at a local park.

The second year of the L.A. Club Service Learning Project was a “Stop the Invasive Species” campaign, again in their community. L.A. Club members contacted the city of Plymouth and through the office of the mayor, brought out a forest expert to explain about different invasive species around their neighborhood. L.A. Club members again recruited younger kids in their community to learn about Buckthorn and Prickly Bush and spent a few hours digging up the plants. Their efforts were recognized by the mayor in a thank you letter, much to the excitement of the L.A. Club members!

L.A. Club members are currently working on their 2012 Service Learning Project: A Quest of French Park. The quest involves an educational brochure that park-goers can use to understand the

natural history of their walking path. Information in the quest brochure includes flora and fauna a park-goer might see, brief descriptions about habitats, a history of the landscape, including post-glacier formations, and how humans interact with the park. This service-learning project provides L.A. Club members a chance to participate in a project that teaches the community about the natural space around them.

The partnership with Three Rivers Park District has become an important component of L.A. Club, especially because the CONECT apartment complexes have little outdoor space. Teens are able to spend time in nature and learn about the importance of environmental stewardship. Volunteering with the park has become a way for them to give back to their communities while experiencing a fun outdoor activity. The annual service-learning project also empowers L.A. Club members to be positive contributors to their community. They are learning new things about the parks in the area, and challenging each other to communicate that knowledge to the greater community. This project encourages them to take charge and become leaders in conservation efforts in their own backyards.

### **III. Findings**

In the analysis of all data collected in this study, three prominent themes emerged: the importance of outdoor activities, youth leadership development, and the impact of community service projects on L.A. Club members. Outdoor activities allowed member to try new things and be pushed out of their comfort zones. Members also learned that their natural surroundings could provide free, fun, entertainment. Parents reported seeing an increase in their child's leadership skills while members themselves identified ways L.A. Club helped them become better leaders. L.A. Club service projects encouraged members to give back to their community and showed the youth participants that they could have a positive impact in their own neighborhoods. Through the interviews conducted with professionals in the field, L.A. Club member and parent surveys, and document analysis, these themes became clear.

While this study did not research long-term effects of being in L.A. Club, the skills the youth participants learn in this program are beneficial for their future endeavors. Through L.A. Club, members learn leadership skills, how to work as an effective team, time management, responsibility, and respect, among others. They identify personal values and think about how their actions reflect their beliefs. They learn to start thinking about future plans and how to set goals and work on steps to achieve them. As one parent said, “they have become more alarmed about their futures and how to solve problems correctly.” They also learn how to become positive social change agents and see that their actions impact their neighborhoods.

The unique partnership between two community organizations, CONECT and Three Rivers Park District, allows for individual growth while instilling a strong sense of community. L.A. Club Members witness, and participate in, the positive impact these organizations have, thus encouraging them to become more engaged.

## The Importance of Outdoor Activities

Experiencing different outdoor activities is essential to the unique structure of L.A. Club. CONECT staff and Three Rivers Park District employees, all identified the importance of outdoor activities in the success of L.A. Club. Outdoor activities provided youth with engaging, challenging, and meaningful experiences. The outdoor activities pushed members out of their comfort zone and opened up possibilities of the diversity of fun, free activities around them. It also became clear that there is a distance between L.A. Club members and their natural world. L.A. Club, in conjunction with Three Rivers, tries to close that distance and expose members to the importance of outdoor activity.

When engaging in outdoor activities, L.A. Club members learn about their natural surroundings and experience new and different types of fun. Ann Schinas, an Outdoor Recreation Specialist with the Outdoor Recreation School of Three Rivers, identified the importance of spending time in nature, not just for L.A. Club members, but for all people:

Well I think it's tremendously important for *anybody* to experience outdoor activities but I think very important for these kids who may not otherwise get an opportunity to do that. To be able to go, not just outdoors, but to participate in these really focused recreation activities like kayaking, or archery, or the climbing wall. That's something that not every kid gets to do. So to be able to participate in those activities, I think pushes them out of their comfort zone and when you do that, then you open up more of the world. Then you have more belief in yourself that you can try new things and be successful. And then add to that the outdoor element, which I just think is good to connect people to a part of what they are, you know?

Ann clearly believes that spending time in nature is beneficial for L.A. Club members. In all of the interviews with field professionals, spending time outdoors was identified as a way to challenge young people to learn new things and get out of their comfort zones, pillars of the L.A. Club mission.

The transcripts of the three interviews with field professionals were generated into a word cloud to provide clarity of the importance of nature (See Figure 1). As is apparent from the largest words, “Outside”, “Activities”, “Nature”, etc., interviewees identified the importance of spending time outside.



The disconnect between young people and the natural world also emerged through this study. In addition to current research identifying the loss of natural play and what has been called the nature-deficit disorder, field professionals reported seeing this phenomenon in their own work. Alex McKinney said:

Part of it is growing up in an urban area. I still feel kids go outside and play a lot but it's more playing basketball or riding your bike down the street. It's not the experience of being in a park or fishing or canoeing or trying a different outdoor activity. So I feel that's more where that's lacking. I still feel the physical activity is there, although not as much as it used to be, with the progression of video games and all that. But where I think it lacks is more the natural resources of the parks that are available to them. And we see that in everything from Gameboys to iPhones to what are they doing tonight? They're inside playing video games, you know having a tournament in Modern Warfare.

Young people are spending more time inside in front of screens. When they do go outside, it's part of structured activities, like basketball, not simply exploring the natural world, using creativity and engaged in imaginative play.

Kate Hanson, an AmeriCorps VISTA member, CONECT Program Assistant, and leader of the Lakeview Commons L.A. Club, also noted the disconnect between L.A. Club members and spending time outdoors:

I have noticed that the L.A. Club kids don't like necessarily to be outside, unless it's the prime conditions. That they will complain a lot that there's bugs or it's raining, or it's too hot, or it's too cold. And I know that they are not spending a lot of time outside. They make that clear to me. That usually, when they come to L.A. Club and we spend it outside, that's when they are spending time outside...It's getting them outside and experiencing nature and learning about new things and just broadening their horizons. Taking a break from their typical day.

As Kate Hanson mentioned, her members don't often like to spend time outside, unless it's “prime conditions”, but after overcoming initial discomforts, members reported having fun and identified a number of positive benefits in having participated in the outdoor activity.

Another important point regarding the importance of outdoor activity identified in this study,

was the fear of nature these kids faced before spending time outside. Ann Schinas said, “What I see is just a fearfulness and a discomfort, being outdoors. You know I think that's the biggest thing. Certainly along with that comes a lack of understanding or awareness of what is around them in terms of plants and animals and you know, the workings of the natural world. But even more basic than that, is just a discomfort in being outside.” Although there is this fear of nature and a disconnection from it, L.A. Club provides an avenue for closing the gap between young people and the outdoors.

Spending time outdoors is important for young people because they can learn new things about their world and challenge themselves to have fun experiencing different activities. They have to stretch outside their comfort zone and try unknown, and sometimes intimidating, things. The skills they develop when engaged in outdoor activity are extremely beneficial. One of these skills is leadership, as that is of course, the purpose of L.A. Club.

### **Leadership Development**

Developing leadership skills was an obvious theme that emerged from this study. As an essential component of L.A. Club, leadership development was highlighted in the data. Members reported being able to identify what leadership meant to them and how they develop leadership skills through L.A. Club. Parents, CONECT staff, and Three Rivers employees also reported seeing positive leadership development among participants.

When asked how she incorporates leadership into L.A. Club activities, Kate Hanson said,

Once a month our mentor, she's a professor at the University of Minnesota, and she does a leadership night where we really focus on the leadership components like values and mission statements and what it means to be a leader. And then Three Rivers Park District activities we're always encouraging the kids to be leaders. Whether it's just stepping outside their comfort zone or having one student teach the activity or just encourage them to try new things.

Developing leadership skills can look different depending on the activity and the member. As Kate mentioned, leadership skills can be identifying values or simply trying something new.

Ann Schinas also talked about leadership skills and how L.A. Club members develop them throughout the program. “With each other I think they do a fabulous job of stepping into the role of leaders, reaching beyond their little group, I think it’s going to take some more time.” As Ann mentioned, developing these skills does not happen right away, but for many students, L.A. Club provides an important introduction to developing these skills. Alex McKinney also reported how developing leadership skills is a process to be improved upon over time.

The first year, just trying new things outside their comfort zone which allowed them to build confidence. Which is one of the big parts. Each year we had returning students, we asked them to change their role from year to year, based on what they were hoping to get out of the club. So by the second year I think what we were doing with them, if they had gone through the first year already we expected them to take more of a leadership role.

This progression of developing leadership skills is encouraging when looking at the impact L.A. Club has on its members. They are continually growing and becoming more confident as young leaders in their community.

L.A. Club members also reported understanding what leadership means and how leadership skills are developed through the program.

**Table 1: Member Survey Q3**

<b>1. What does leadership mean to you?</b>	
Girl, 16	To take charge in situations to benefit others.
Boy, 15	Positive. Guidance. Wisdom. Responsibility.
Girl, 15	Being a role model to younger kids.
Girl, 16	To be your own person while following your dreams to be successful and helping others to do the same.
Girl, 14	A positive person that does good deeds and knows how to handle situations and has followers

**Table 2:Member Survey Q4**

<b>2. How do you develop leadership skills in L.A. Club?</b>	
Girl, 14	By doing team building activities and how to handle situations.
Girl, 16	You realize that your future is a big part of your leadership and to be a leader you need to know how to solve problems right.
Girl, 15	Trying my best at activities with people.
Boy, 15	I develop leadership skills from my peers in L.A. Club.
Girl, 16	Going out in different situations to bring out different strengths in people.

Table 1 shows what L.A. Club members believe leadership means. Members mentioned that leadership, at least in part, is an understanding that individual actions impact others, and that leaders act in a positive, respectful manner to benefit others.

Table 2 shows that L.A. Club members understand that they develop leadership skills through L.A. Club. It also demonstrates a deeper understanding of what leadership means. One girl reported that in L.A. Club she identifies and encourages “different strengths in people”, a very mature insight into being an effective leader.

Most parents also reported seeing an increase in their child's leadership skills. Table 3 shows that only one parent noted that there was no change, whereas the other three parents noted an increase.

**Table 3.Parent Survey Q4**

<b>1. Have you noticed any development in your child's leadership skills?</b>	
No	Yes
1	3

**Comments:**  
“He has taken a little bit more responsibility at home and school.”  
“They have become more alarmed about their futures and how to solve problems correctly.”  
“She is a movement on the weekends and plays with friends kind.”  
“None.”

This development in leadership skills is an essential component of L.A. Club, and has been a goal of the program since its formation. Members are encouraged to challenge themselves to try new things, get out of their comfort zone, and push each other to be positive role models and leaders within their community. Members are asked to reflect on their own leadership styles and how they can use skills learned in L.A. Club to achieve their goals. Developing leadership skills is not only important for individual members, but has a meaningful impact on their community.

### **Service Projects and Becoming Social Change Agents**

Expanding on leadership development, this study identified the importance of the community service and volunteerism component of L.A. Club. Through this program, members see themselves as leaders and therefore social change agents within their communities. They realize that they can have a positive impact right in their own neighborhoods. They understand that their role as youth leaders is to learn about causes that are meaningful to them, work towards achieving a positive outcome, and then act as teachers for peers and younger kids.

Alex McKinney discussed the service projects in detail, and emphasized the impact these projects had on L.A. Club members and their community.

We asked them to participate in Global Youth Leader Day to plan a project of their choice, and the only parameter we gave was we wanted it to be something that focused in on the environment. We felt they could impact that. And outside that, we felt it could be something within the parks or in their community. Two years I did with them, they chose to do it in their community.

One really important aspect of the service project was that the members themselves had complete ownership. In working with youth, especially teenagers, this ownership is invaluable. Young people are much more likely to engage in meaningful work, when it directly impacts their lives. L.A. Club members chose to complete a service project within their own community because that is where they saw a need and felt they could make a difference. Alex McKinney describes the projects further:

The first year we did it they did a lake clean-up at Parkers Lake. They recruited younger kids from Lakeview Commons...We went down to Parkers Lake, and each youth leader took a group of three or four kids and they were in charge of those kids and they picked up trash around the lake. The second year they chose to do a “stop the invaders” campaign. So once again they recruited kids from Lakeview Commons, this time around though, one of them actually worked with the mayor for the city of Plymouth to get a local forester out there, and we identified and talked about some of the common invasives we see around the parks, specifically right in the Lakeview Commons area, Prickly Bush and Buck-Thorn

Being able to see the impact of their work was an essential aspect of both of these projects.

Additionally, L.A. Club members were able to use the leadership skills they had worked on throughout the year to lead groups of younger kids. They acted as the experts, which expanded their confidence and showed them that they could take charge. They demonstrated pride in their own abilities and showed that their group could really make a difference in their community.

Kate Hanson also identified that the service projects have been a positive experience for L.A. Club members. “They are providing this service not only to the Parks District but also to the community that they live in. They've really taken pride in what they've created and want their family and friends to come and see it. And they make comments that they want to do something that benefits their community.” Kate also identified how important the projects are for members in terms of learning about different causes and ways they can improve their neighborhoods. Through these service projects, L.A. Club members begin to see themselves as real agents of change because they are engaged in service that results in physical improvements to their communities. The physical outcomes then provide other benefits, such as feeling proud of themselves, their peers, and their communities.

When looking at youth empowerment, these service projects reflect the three components discussed previously: learning new things for an intellectual challenge, an environment of emotional nurturance, and members are given the freedom to incorporate their own ideas as a form of shared power. The service projects allow for individual members to use their own strengths and work together

towards a goal. They discover that they can have a real influence in their community as positive social change agents.

### **Lessons Learned:**

There are a number of conclusions that can be drawn from this study. The most obvious, outdoor activities are essential for young people. Our job as youth program leaders is to incorporate nature into programming so that younger generations are able to experience the benefits of spending time outdoors and are not subjected to rising negative consequences of the nature-deficit disorder.

Because this study did not focus on all of the barriers to spending time outdoors, it is difficult to say with any certainty what exactly led to CONECT kids spending time inside. I would have liked to focus more on socio-economic and cultural factors in time spent outdoors. I think it's important to note that the families living in CONECT sites do not fit into typically “urban” or “suburban” categories. They live in multi-unit apartment complexes (associated more with urban areas), but also in the suburbs. Their experience is not that of urban youth whose only outdoor exposure may be concrete sidewalks and small city parks, nor is it that of suburban youth who may have large backyards. This study could have been enhanced by looking at this distinction more closely.

Successful youth programs highlight empowerment activities through incorporating three components: intellectual challenge, emotional nurturance, and shared power. One way to provide this is through service-learning projects, such as those done by the CONECT L.A. Clubs and Three Rivers Park District. Volunteerism and community service engage youth in a meaningful way, thus showing young people that they can act as social change agents themselves and positively impact in their world. Leadership development comes naturally through these types of projects, but should be highlighted and further emphasized within youth programming. Young people will take up the challenge to become great leaders, if given the opportunity to do so.

When thinking about future applications of this study, on a very direct level, I hope to

encourage future CONECT staff to incorporate more outdoor activities and service-learning projects into L.A. Club programming. Three Rivers Park District and the CONECT program will undoubtedly see how their partnership has positively impacted youth and families living at CONECT sites.

More generally, there is still a lot of research that could be conducted regarding the relationship between outdoor programming and youth leadership development. It would be interesting to specifically focus on environmental service-learning projects, and how youth respond to that type of community engagement. Certainly environmental groups, and hopefully other youth programs, will benefit from this type of research as a way to engage young people in conservationism and train a younger generation to become positive social change agents.

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## APPENDIX

### (A)L.A. Club Member Survey Results

1. Is this your first year in L.A. Club?

NO	YES
5	0

2. My experience in L.A. Club this year has been positive.

TRUE	FALSE
5	0

3. What does leadership mean to you?

Girl, 16	To take charge in situations to benefit others.
Boy, 15	Positive. Guidance. Wisdom. Responsibility.
Girl, 15	Being a role model to younger kids.
Girl, 16	To be your own person while following your dreams to be successful and helping others to do the same.
Girl, 14	A positive person that does good deeds and knows how to handle situations and has followers

4. How do you develop leadership skills through L.A. Club?

Girl, 14	By doing team building activities and how to handle situations.
Girl, 16	You realize that your future is a big part of your leadership and to be a leader you need to know how to solve problems right.
Girl, 15	Trying my best at activities with people.
Boy, 15	I develop leadership skills from my peers in L.A. Club.
Girl, 16	Going out in different situations to bring out different strengths in people.

5. My experience with Three Rivers Park District this year has been positive.

TRUE	FALSE
5	0

6. What has been your favorite outdoor L.A. Club activity so far this year?

Girl, 16	Rock climbing
Boy, 15	My favorite outdoor activity was the camping trips.
Girl, 15	I have to say all of them because they where fun.

Girl, 16	The camping trip
Girl, 14	Playing with the elders

7. If I wasn't in L.A. Club, I would spend my time...

Girl, 14	Sleeping, eating, staying inside
Girl, 16	Eating, sleeping
Girl, 15	Reading, homework, social with my phones, sleep.
Boy, 15	Sleeping.
Girl, 16	Sleep, homework, eating.

8. How important is it to you to spend time outdoors?

Very	Somewhat	Not at all
4	1	0

**(B) Parent Survey Results**

1. Is this your child's first year in L.A. Club?

NO	YES
4	0

2. My child has had a positive experience in L.A. Club so far this year.

TRUE	FALSE
4	0

3. If my child were not in L.A. Club, they would most likely spend their free time...

Parent of girl, 15	Reading books, social on the phone with friends, homework, sleep.
Parent of boy, 15	Sleeping, skating and Xbox
Parent of girls, 14,16	Sleep, eating or working
Parent of girl, 16	Sleep, eating, homework, working

4. Have you noticed any development in your child's leadership skills?

No	Yes
1	3

**Comments:**

“He has taken a little bit more responsibility at home and school.”

“They have become more alarmed about their futures and how to solve problems correctly.”

“She is a movement on the weekends and plays with friends kind.”

**(C) Transcript of Interview with Kate Hanson on April 30, 2012**

MD: So welcome Kate. Thank you for interviewing with me.

KH: No problem.

MD: You've signed the informed consent form and I just want to verbally remind you that you can terminate the interview at any time and you are free to also not answer any questions you feel you don't want to answer.

KH: OK

MD: Could you please state your name and occupation and your involvement with the CONECT L.A. Clubs?

KH: Sure, my name is Kate Hanson and I'm an AmeriCorps Program Assistant with CONECT through Interfaith Outreach and I help facilitate a L.A. Club at Lakeview Commons

Me: Excellent, can you tell me a little bit about the relationship between the L.A. Clubs and Three Rivers Park District?

KH: Sure, So about three years ago, the Vista prior to me, created a partnership with Three Rivers Park District to create more outdoor recreation activities for the L.A. Club. And my club currently does at least two activities with the Park District a month. We have done service projects for the last three years with the Park District and um, continue to build our partnership

MD: Great. Can you tell me a little bit about the service project for this year?

KH: yes, so this year the L.A. Club created a quest for one of the District's parks, French Park and the quest involved the L.A. Club members to interview Park District staff, and then they created stopping points on the quest and wrote little narratives for all the stopping points, and then had to walk the park and write directional clues and it will be released to the public in a couple weeks hopefully

MD: Great. Can you tell me how you incorporate leadership development components into your programming?

KH: Yeah, so.. just with Three Rivers or?

MD: Either with Three Rivers or with your mentor and other things like that.

KH: Well we do at every meeting. We incorporate some form of leadership. Once a month our mentor, she's a professor at the University of Minnesota, and she does a leadership night where we really focus on the leadership components like values and mission statements and what it means to be a leader. And then Three Rivers Park District activities we're always encouraging the kids to be leaders. Whether it's just stepping outside their comfort zone or having one student teach the activity or just encourage them to try new things.

MD: Great, going back to the service project, do you feel, and I don't want to be too leading with this question, but that there service project helps them feel more connected to the community?

KH: Yeah! I definitely think so because they are providing this service not only to the Parks District but also to the community that they live in. They've really taken pride in what they've created and want their family and friends to come and see it.

MD: So would you say that they are learning how to be social change agents through this partnership with Three Rivers and doing these service projects?

KH: Yes. And they make comments that they, you know, whenever we talk about service projects they want to do something that benefits their community so they think, you know, let's clean up garbage at this park, or let's make this park more beautiful.

MD: Great. Do you believe, so part of my study is looking at the nature-deficit disorder among kids today and part of that is kids nowadays spend at least 30 hours a week on average in front of a screen instead of, you know, outside playing with their friends. Do you see what has been referred to as the nature-deficit disorder either with your L.A. Clubs or in the CONECT program in general?

KH: I have noticed that the L.A. Club kids don't like necessarily to be outside, unless it's the prime conditions. That they will complain a lot that there's bugs or it's raining, or it's too hot, or it's too cold. And I know that they are not spending a lot of time outside. They make that clear to me. That usually, when they come to L.A. Club and we spend it outside, that's when they are spending time outside

MD: That's their time that they're spending outside?

KH: Yeah

MD: So do you believe that the outdoor experiences are important for the L.A. Club kids?

KH: Yeah absolutely. It's getting them outside and experiencing nature and learning about new things and just broadening their horizons. Taking a break from their typical day

MD: Excellent. Great. Is there anything else you'd like to say about the relationship with Three Rivers or anything about the L.A. Clubs, things you've been doing, looking forward for these kids.

KH: I will say that the partnership has been a huge benefit to L.A. Club that L.A. Club wouldn't be as strong as it is without them because we are now able to offer these kinds of experiences to the kids. And it helps them branch out and try new things and pushes them out of their comfort zone. And also, through all our activities with them they are building a relationship with Three Rivers and in the future Three Rivers can hire them to be park staff and volunteers. A couple of our members volunteered with them in the summer for youth programming at the parks.

MD: So they're getting that experience in L.A. Club and then also with Three Rivers.

KH: Yes absolutely

MD: Excellent, well thank you so much for your participation Kate. And upon completion of this study, this will be available to you. So thank you again.

KH: You're welcome.

#### **(D) Transcript of interview with Ann Schinas on May 3, 2012**

MD: Thank you Ann for participating in this interview. I wanted to interview professionals with experience in the field of youth programming and especially outdoor programming. So again, thank you for participating this is really great of you. Could you please say your name and your occupation and how long you've been working with the CONECT L.A. Clubs?

AS: Yes, my name is Ann Schinas and I am an Outdoor Recreation Specialist with the outdoor recreation school of Three Rivers Park District and I have been working with the L.A. Club, um, pretty focused for the past season, for the past school year, and sporadically the year prior to that.

MD: Great. So Ann, in your experience, how important is it for these kids to experience outdoor activities?

AS: Oh my goodness, that's such a big question!

MD: Yes, it is a big question!

AS: Um, well I think it's tremendously important for *anybody* to experience outdoor activities but I think very important for these kids who may not otherwise get an opportunity to do that. To be able to go, not just outdoors, but to participate in these really focused recreation activities like kayaking, or archery, or the climbing wall. That's something that not every kid gets to do. So to be able to participate in those activities, I think pushes them out of their comfort zone and when you do that, then you open up more of the world. Then you have more belief in yourself that you can try new things and be successful. And then add to that the outdoor element, which I just think is good to connect people to a part of what they are, you know?

MD: Definitely. I know you and I have talked about this briefly during our camping trip, I'm also writing about the loss between this connection to nature. You mentioned the nature-deficit disorder and I read Richard Louv's book, so he's been a big inspiration for part of this study. Have you, in your experience, can you talk a little bit about the nature-deficit and how you've seen it? And ways that Three Rivers has been reaching out to these kids to get them these outdoor experiences?

AS: Sure. I think what jumps to mind primarily in terms of nature-deficit symptoms, what I see is just a fearfulness and a discomfort, being outdoors. You know I think that's the biggest thing. Certainly along with that comes a lack of understanding or awareness of what is around them in terms of plants and animals and you know, the workings of the natural world. But even more basic than that, is just a discomfort in being outside.

MD: Would you say it's a generational difference, or are parents feeling this fear as well?

AS: Good question. Not knowing their parents I can't speak directly to that. But certainly that's true for many adults. Not related to them, the L.A. Club kids particularly, but sure, I've seen that numerous times.

MD: Can you tell me a little bit about the activities that the L.A. Club does with Three Rivers, how we incorporate leadership development components into those activities?

AS: You know with Kate, the leader of the [Lakeview] L.A. Club, she and I sat down early in the school year and created, well she and I talked about the need for the kids to create their own evaluation sheet. Something that they could use to define what makes a good leader. And then to be able to evaluate that in themselves, and in their peers. You know, sadly, I don't know if that's been used yet this school year.

MD: I think it has..

AS: I'm kind of in transition to flipping out of this role, you know leading the L.A. Club kids, it's shifting over to Megan, so I don't know, do you know?

MD: Yeah actually, Kate and I have looked at it together. I'm not sure if her group has done it, but some of the questions, for the Kimberly Meadows group, we kind of talked about those questions at one of our meetings.

AS: Did you feel it was a productive activity for them to do?

MD: I did, yes, definitely. And I think, personally, part of L.A. Club, the leadership component, is already there. You know these kids are signing up, committing to a team, they're coming every week, so you know they're learning to be leaders that way. But also, I've seen such great improvements, just social skills and the way they're talking, the language they're using with each other just from being in this club, so I am seeing a lot of great leadership development.

AS: Good, good. So, of course, I set the bar really high, in terms of what I'd like to see from them. We debuted the quest the other day, that the kids put a lot of work into. And I'll be darn if it wasn't like

pulling teeth to get them to stand in front of a group of their peers, you know they were high schoolers, 20 of them from a different school, so you know, kids our L.A. Club kids didn't know. But to get them to speak about their experience about what they did, it was like they wanted to just hide under a rock. I was like, Darn! Come on, step up and take some ownership. And be able to share what you did. So it's definitely a work in progress. With each other I think they do a fabulous job of stepping into the role of leaders, reaching beyond their little group, I think it's going to take some more time.

MD: There's some work there still.

AS: Although, I will say, that we have had some L.A. Club kids participate as volunteers at some of our summer camps, and at some of our large school group kids that come out and we've had a few bumps in the road, but when the kids are in contact one-on-one with younger kids, they have done a fabulous job of modeling good leadership.

MD: great.

AS: So that has been good. The concept of suiting up and showing up every time, if I say I'm going to do something, I'm going to be there, that needs a little bit of bolstering. But when the kids are face-to-face with younger kids, I definitely see some fabulous leadership going on, and that's super fun to see.

MD: Great. Can you tell me a little bit, I know Three Rivers started this partnership with CONECT in 2007, can you tell me a little bit about the Three Rivers side? Did you want to connect to youth in the community, I know part of your goal is to recruit volunteers, as you just mentioned, um, but just that initial connection to the L.A. Club?

AS: I honestly have to refer to Alex. My hunch is that it was less about getting volunteers for us, and more about just wanting to get kids outdoors and seeing this as an opportunity to do that.

MD: Great.

AS: I think it is morphed into, hey, this could be really neat connection to possible future employment for these kids, but I would be surprised if that was the initial idea.

MD: ok, yeah great. So is there anything else, in terms of ways CONECT, you know thinking about the future, and moving forward, ways we can improve on incorporating either leadership components into our programming or more outdoor activities?

AS: Hmm, you know I think the model that has been used is really good. This year I know that some of the kids were disappointed that they did more quest development and less actual outdoor activities, so I think we need to go back to that model of really doing more of the activities. Those opportunities to just go play outside create such great community and I don't want to lose that. So that's the key. I'd also love to see more of the camping, more overnight stuff.

MD: Yeah! Definitely!

AS: Because I think, talk about getting out of your comfort zone! Having an opportunity to just share, you know I know the kids do that when they do the sleeping out in cardboard boxes for the homeless.

MD: Yeah, the Sleep Out.

AS: Yup, but those opportunities to really get outside your normal routine and become more vulnerable with each other, it's just such good growth opportunity.

MD: So you just mentioned that the kids were kind of grumbling a bit about this service project, the quest, but I'm really looking at those service projects as inspiring the kids in our L.A. Clubs to become social change agents themselves and give back to their community. Is there anything you'd like to say, I think you, were you part of the initial service project idea?

AS: That was Alex. And I think that's a great way to go, really looking at more environmental stuff. This project that I threw at them was more homework oriented. It was a lot of research and writing. So I think that was a little hard, and I'm not sure if that counted for the lower turnout we had on some of those nights, but the days that the kids got to come and actually walk the path and figure out the quest, the kids that came, we had a blast!

MD: great.

AS: I don't know what the attendance, the reason for the low attendance was this year, but it was definitely lower.

MD: I'm wondering too, if kids don't get out in nature, and have those activities where they're experiencing nature, where are our future nature conservationists coming from.

AS: Exactly!

MD: So I think it's just something that, you know having those activities, I think it's something that just really inspires kids.

AS: yup. Sure.

MD: Do you have anything else you'd like to add? Further insight as you're transitioning out of this role?

AS: I don't at the moment but if anything else comes to mind, I'll certainly email you though.

MD: Great. Well thank you so much Ann, I really appreciate you taking the time to talk to me today and I think, I'm writing right now, and will hopefully compile all my data and have a study completed by the end of the month.

AS: Good luck with that, I'd love to see it when you're done.

MD: Definitely, I'll send it off to you.

AS: Excellent, you take care.

MD: Thanks so much Ann.

**(E) Transcript of interview with Alex McKinney on April 11, 2012**

MD: Hey Alex, this is Maggie Dudley calling with CONECT.

AM: Hey Maggie, how are you doing?

MD: Good, how are you?

AM: Good, good.

MD: Good. Thank you so much for interviewing with me, this is really helpful.

AM: Yeah, no problem. I'm glad you're putting this together. I'll be interested in seeing what you put together.

MD: yeah, definitely. So, I'm wondering if Ann already told you, but I'm working on my Masters degree right now and looking at our L.A. Clubs as a case study. Looking at how outdoor activities empower youth and encourage leadership development. So that's the focus of my study. So I'm talking to some professionals with field experience and of course you helped start the partnership with CONECT L.A. Clubs with Three Rivers.

AM: Yeah, sure.

MD: So first I have to ask you if it's ok with you if I publish your name and occupation in this study.

AM: Yeah that's fine.

MD: Great, thanks so much Alex.

AM: no problem

MD: So to begin if you could tell me a little about how Three Rivers initially connected with the L.A. Clubs and just what your role was in that.

AM: sure. Well, Three Rivers for a long time has been doing outdoor education programs. But our focus has been more field trip based. So we would do things with groups for two hours to one week, or a couple times a year based on what schools or nonprofits could come up with. So our whole goal was to set-up a year long program that would impact youth a little bit more than that one time, two-hour experience. And our focus was more environmental based. So, that fit in nicely with what L.A. Club was at the time. They were more humanitarian efforts. At the time we had five or six kids when we first started. Our goal was to get them out in the parks and get them to realize what resources were available to them and to also develop life skills while they were out there.

MD: Definitely.

AM: So the first year we met, we set it up where the kids would meet every week, and every other week they would be out in the parks doing different sorts of programs that they probably haven't done before.

MD: Great, and also, do you remember was that with Josiah, the original group there?

AM: No that was with Nikki.

MD: With Nikki, ok. Great. Do you know, part of looking at this study is talking about the nature-deficit disorder and how a lot of our CONECT kids don't spend a lot of time outside. And of course, I'm sure that's part of Three Rivers' goal, is to increase the opportunities for kids to get outside. Can you talk a little bit about the activities you did that the kids may not have done before?

AM: sure. Well the first year, it was interesting because we had 4:30 – 6:00 pm which was great April through June and September through October, but from October through March we had to change up what we would have initially done with groups because of the time we had to meet. So when we had daylight we would do canoeing, kayaking, orienteering, GPS. And archery as well. But as it got darker we switched up what we did, based on where lighting was available. We actually took the kids rock climbing at Porthill Rockwall starting in November. We did some demonstrations with them under the trail lights, we used the trail lights quite a bit back then. We had an indoor horse facility for our mounted patrol so we set up tours with them over there and the kids got to meet the horses, take care of the horses. Got to ride a horse, which for a lot of them was pretty interesting. You know you're next to this huge animal and I don't think they expected how big the animal was or what they were doing, they were actually pretty nervous about that one. We were able to get a pool space and work on kayak rolling with the kids. So we had a session on that. Just whatever we could do to focus on outdoor skills, even if we couldn't be outdoors all the time. Cross-country skiing outside in the winter, that was a new experience for a lot of them. Snowshoeing, moonlight snowshoeing. And we would also do a small solo experience at night. So we would intentionally turn off the trail lights on some of our trails and have the kids go out there and we'd talk a little bit about the stars, but also have them experience the dark and the wilderness by themselves. Which was eye opening for them as well. So a variety of things for them.

MD: Great. I remember when Ann, when we did the overnight camping trip, we did a night walk and had all the lights off, no flashlights, and we tried to do it silent, I don't know how great the kids were at keeping quiet but (laughing..)

AM: (laughing..) yeah, you have to spread them out a fair amount.

MD: Right. But it was just such a great experience and the kids really liked it.

AM: Cool.

MD: Did you incorporate specific leadership development components into any of those initial activities?

AM: Yeah we did. I think the first one was really, it's been a progression each year. The first year, just trying new things outside their comfort zone which allowed them to build confidence. Which is one of

the big parts. And then the programs developed. Each year we had returning students, we asked them to change their role from year to year, based on what they were hoping to get out of the club. So by the second year I think what we were doing with them, if they had gone through the first year already we expected them to take more of a leadership role. We developed the different elections, you know, with being in charge of nutrition, you know snacks and those sorts of things, based on a round table thing. And also, when they were out in the field, a lot of times for new activities with new students, we'd pair people up, for like orienteering. But the returning ones, based on their abilities, we'd have them do it solo, so knowing not only the concepts involved, but the ability to make decisions on their own and that sort of stuff. And that kind of continued and we'd also asked them, once they went through the year, to volunteer in our programs. And teach other students who were coming out to our parks. So then we had a few of them volunteer at our fishing camps and rock climbing, tons of summer camps in general actually. So they were taking the skills they learned and teaching it to kids coming through our programs.

MD: great. That's perfect. Were you involved in the service projects?

AM: Yup.

MD: Could you talk a bit about that?

AM: Sure, I think that's a big part of that leadership element. Essentially what we wanted to do, they were doing great things already with the General Mills sleepover, but to get that environmental focus and environmental awareness, we asked them to participate in Global Youth Leader Day to plan a project of their choice, and the only parameter we gave was we wanted it to be something that focused in on the environment. We felt they could impact that. And outside that, we felt it could be something within the parks or in their community. Two years I did with them, they chose to do it in their community. The first year we did it they did a lake clean-up at Parkers Lake. They recruited younger kids from Lakeview Commons. And what they did was talk to them about the importance of keeping our parks and our lakes clean and the importance of recycling. They actually did recycling activities; the kids made recycling bins and then they also did a relay where they had to pick out what the item was and if it was recyclable or compostable or if it was garbage. And then in teams they had to go through and do that. And then from there we went down to Parkers Lake, and each youth leader took a group of three or four kids and they were in charge of those kids and they picked up trash around the lake. Then at the end we got together, I forget how much trash we collected, but we weighed it all and measured it and showed them the impact they had.

MD: great.

AM: The second year they chose to do a "stop the invaders" campaign. That was more an invasive species thing. So once again they recruited kids from Lakeview Commons, this time around though, one of them actually worked with the mayor for the city of Plymouth to get a local forester out there, and we identified and talked about some of the common invasives we see around the parks, specifically right in the Lakeview Commons area, prickly bush and buckthorn, and then we spent three or four hours removing that from the area. And the forester came out and brought tools to dig it out of the ground. So they got to see the impact of that and how much is actually in the area too.

MD: Great. Yeah so part of this is looking at where are future conservationists are going to come from

and you know, not getting out in nature means not caring about it as much. Do you see any nature-deficit symptoms in the work you do?

AM: Yeah, all the time actually with the kids we work with. Part of it is growing up in an urban area. I still feel kids go outside and play a lot but it's more playing basketball or riding your bike down the street. It's not the experience of being in a park or fishing or canoeing or trying a different outdoor activity. So I feel that's more where that's lacking. I still feel the physical activity is there, although not as much as it used to be, with the progression of video games and all that. But where I think it lacks is more the natural resources of the parks that are available to them. And we see that in everything from gameboys to iphones to what are they doing tonight? They're inside playing video games, you know having a tournament in Modern Warfare.

MD: Right.

AM: So anyways, so there's definitely an increase there, which shows in the health aspect as well with obesity and things.

MD: Great. Well this has been really helpful. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

AM: I don't think so, but I'd love a copy when you're done.

MD: Definitely. Yeah, right now I'm just compiling data right now and will hopefully, my capstone date is in July, so I'll hopefully have it done by the end of this month.

AM: Fantastic.

MD: Thank you again for talking with me, I really appreciate it.

AM: No problem. Thanks Maggie.

MD: Yup, thanks Alex. Bye.