

Nearby Nature creates 'pocket of paradise,' provides environmental education on Milwaukee's north side

Chelsey Lewis / Milwaukee Journal Sentinel / Published Oct 6, 2022



Martina Patterson poses for a portrait Friday, Sept. 16, 2022, at Hopkins Hollow in Milwaukee. Being out in nature allows Patterson to breathe. "It is always something to learn, it is endless," she explained. "It is very humbling because what you thought you knew, you discover something on top of that. It is kind of like a Mandelbrot set, it just keeps spinning. There's so much connectivity and opportunity." *Ebony Cox/Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

When asked what her favorite thing about being out in nature was, Martina "Mars" Patterson closed her eyes and soaked in the sweet September sunshine as birds chirped and Lincoln Creek babbled nearby.

"Simply, being able to breathe," she said, after a moment.

That's what she hopes others can find in Hopkins Hollow, an 18-acre plot of land on the city's northwest side where she sat on a bench overlooking a small waterfall along the creek.

Patterson is a land steward and arts and youth educator for Nearby Nature, an environmental justice and equity initiative that is working with the property's owner, the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District, and the Northwest Side Community Development Corporation to restore the land and turn it into a natural oasis in an area of the city that doesn't have many.

There's no large sign marking the property yet — those are in the works, Patterson said, along with plans for peace post installations by artist Muneer Bahauddeen.

For now, the only indication there's anything beyond the manicured lawn at the intersection of North Hopkins and West Congress is a narrow trail cutting through tall grasses at its eastern end, marked by a small knee-high sign.

Patterson, who teaches environmental education for Nearby Nature in area schools, also brings students to the property to learn. Like most adults who walk by, many of the students don't realize the little park exists beyond the sidewalk.

"They're really surprised when they turn the corner," she said. "Because they didn't know (this was here). And they are very inquisitive, which I appreciate."

That's what Nearby Nature is all about — not only restoring natural spaces in areas of the city that have been historically overlooked, but also providing education about those spaces.

"The goal of Nearby Nature is to connect and expose and reintroduce Black children to nature," Patterson said. "And beyond that, when we're done with our lesson plan, or if we don't come back to that school the following year, I still want to be connected, so at some point if in the future they remember that lady that came and talked about butterflies, now they might want to study lepidoptera. I hope to inspire on that level where they think about me later."



Lincoln Creek flows north through Hopkins Hollow on Monday, Sept. 26, 2022. Nearby Nature and community volunteers have built a short demonstration trail through the property and are working with the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District to restore the land. *Chelsey Lewis And James Nelson/Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

She hopes that inspiration carries forward to college students, too, like the three who worked as interns for Nearby Nature this summer, funded by MMSD.

"I looked at (these internships) not as as just, we're paying you. My main focus is this is an opportunity to learn," Patterson said. "It's just building your skills if you choose to put what you gain into whatever you choose to do after this. Maybe you want to own a restaurant one day, but now you know what plants you can eat or go harvest later. I feel like everything ties back to nature in some kind of way."

Possible careers in nature

Opening kids' eyes to the possibilities in nature, including possible careers, is one of the primary goals of Nearby Nature, which got its start in 2017 with a grant from the Sierra Club Foundation.

David Thomas, who volunteers as Nearby Nature's project coordinator, was part of the team from the Sierra Club's Great Waters Group and others who applied for the grant.

"The proposal was to deal with environmental justice issues in Milwaukee's central city," he said. "The basics of environmental justice is to recognize that communities of color especially impacted by poverty bear a heavier burden when it comes to environmental issues, like environmental degradation, dumping. There are a lot of brownfields in the inner city where toxins were dumped."

Hopkins Hollow represents many of the environmental problems that plague poorer communities. In the 1950s, the Metropolitan Sewerage District lined some of the county's waterways — including Lincoln Creek — with concrete in an effort to move floodwaters away from residential areas more quickly and prevent flooding. The project altered the course of the creek and soon "Lincoln Creek was treated like it was an open sewer," Thomas said. The creek also became contaminated with PCBs, and over time, Hopkins Hollow became something of an unofficial dump site.

While MMSD began removing concrete from the creek in 2000, and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and others began cleaning up the toxins in 2008, the perception of Lincoln Creek as a dumping ground was hard to shake.



Martina Patterson poses for a portrait on one of the newly installed benches at Hopkins Hollow in Milwaukee on Friday, Sept. 16, 2022. Being out in nature allows Patterson to breathe. "It is always something to learn, it is endless," she explained. "It is very humbling because what you thought you knew, you discover something on top of that. It is kind of like a Mandelbrot set, it just keeps spinning. There's so much connectivity and opportunity." *Ebony Cox/Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

"I think that has been ingrained in some of the community members and then it passed down, so a lot of people see this as a sewage runoff or a dumping station," Patterson said, adding she thinks a lot of the illegal dumping was done by contractors who don't live in the neighborhood or people who weren't aware of resources available for getting rid of trash.

Nearby Nature has been working to change that mindset by cleaning up the site and talking with community members. It's already working. Patterson said one day when their group was there dropping wood chips, a neighbor thought they were dumping trash and called out to them to stop.

Patterson said they went over and explained the work they were doing, and that she's thankful for neighbors like that who are watching out for the property.

Environmental justice

While it might seem small, insignificant even, to care about or spend money on such a tiny plot of nature in the middle of a city plagued by serious problems from poverty to crime, those are exactly why this "pocket of paradise," as one Nearby Nature member called Hopkins Hollow, is necessary. Nature is a proven healer, and everybody needs space to breathe and take it in.

"The fact is that the people of color deserve to have the same experiences outdoors that people in white communities have, and they don't," Thomas said. According to the Trust for Public Land's ParkScore Index, 90% of Milwaukee residents live within a 10-minute walk of a park. But people in neighborhoods of color have access to 70% less nearby park space than those in white neighborhoods, and those living in lower-income neighborhoods have access to 57% less nearby park space than those in higher-income neighborhoods.

Thomas pointed to an example of that environmental injustice in the city, comparing the Milwaukee River Greenway, which has a well-established coalition that helps maintain 878 acres of greenspace linking 12 parks and 28 miles of trails through wealthier neighborhoods in Shorewood and Milwaukee's east side; with the Lincoln Creek Greenway, which has many areas that are trash-filled and neglected, and doesn't have a comparable coalition as it passes through more impoverished neighborhoods on the north side.

"Certain parts of Lincoln Creek are invested in and 'better kept.' This area is just kind of forgotten," Patterson said.

But just because those areas of the city have other problems doesn't mean the environmental needs should be ignored, Thomas said.

"Environmentalists would use that as an excuse for not doing work in the central city," he said. " 'Oh, why don't we have any Black people on our board? Well, they're too busy dealing with issues like poverty and racism and bad education and lack of access to good jobs, and all these other things.' But things are all interconnected. And just because people are poor and marginalized doesn't mean they shouldn't have access to nature."

Nearby Nature sought to change that and from the beginning held community listening sessions and engaged with environmental leaders like Venice Williams from Alice's Garden Urban Farm, Brenda Coley from the Milwaukee Water Commons, and Yvonne McCaskill, the coordinator of the Century City Triangle Neighborhood Association.

The group started with a focus on environmental education, contracting with the Urban Ecology Center to bring educators into local schools and partnering with groups like the Boys & Girls Clubs and the Uniting Garden Homes neighborhood association.

While the UEC has a similar mission to Nearby Nature, the former nonprofit's three centers — in Riverside Park, Washington Park and the Menomonee Valley — focus on serving a population within two miles of those centers, leaving a gap on the city's north side that Nearby Nature fills.

In 2019 the Milwaukee Environmental Consortium took over fiscal sponsorship of the group and hired Patterson as a youth educator. Before the pandemic, Nearby Nature held 68 programs in four youth-serving agencies that serve a population that is 90% or more Black.

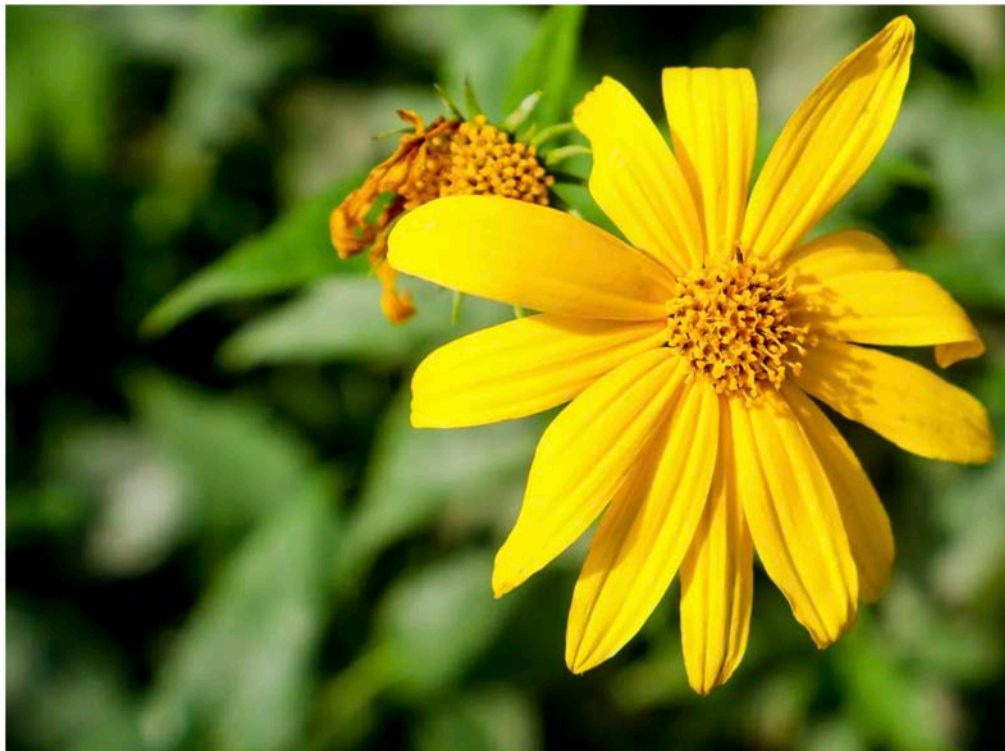
With education programs rolling, Nearby Nature set its sights on a small plot of land along Lincoln Creek and got permission from MMSD to build a 500-foot demonstration trail there with the help of volunteers in 2021.

Patterson said Sierra Taliaferro, an outdoor educator on Nearby Nature's steering committee, dubbed the spot Hopkins Hollow because it is a hollow — or narrow valley — along Hopkins Street.

Walking through the hollow

Patterson led the way through the hollow on that September day, pointing out a small frog that hopped out of the way as we walked by, and later pausing to point out deer tracks in the mud. Nearby Nature — and by default, Patterson, as the nonprofit's only land steward — is responsible for maintaining the trail. They also bought and installed two benches that were made by interns with Reflo, a nonprofit dedicated to sustainable water use. MMSD manages the site's invasive species, which include garlic mustard, buckthorn, wild parsnip and giant ragweed.

But in September the native plants were stealing the show, filling the prairie we walked through with bright yellow goldenrod and cheery purple aster. As she made our way into the wooded section of the trail, Patterson paused to talk about Jerusalem artichoke, a wild edible which she said has roots that look like ginger but taste like a potato.



A Jerusalem Artichoke pictured Friday, Sept. 16, 2022, at Hopkins Hollow in Milwaukee. Ebony Cox / Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

She said she hopes that one day the site might have “a wild food space, so that we can have access to healthy foods in an otherwise healthy food desert.”

Patterson said community members have also expressed interest in learning about medicinal plants.

We arrived at the end of the trail where the property’s woods meet a prairie landscape. Patterson said there are four biomes, or plant and animal communities, on the property— southern mesic forest, mesic savanna, riparian and cliff/hillside prairie — which is one reason it’s unique and important.



Danaya Love, 15, of Golda Meir School Upper Campus, middle, leads Princess Lee, 16, of Tenor High School, right, Milton Byers, from Wild Indigo Nature Explorations, left, and Jamarion Landry, 18, of MATC, behind, through the Hopkins Hollow trail observing different plants and simply being in and appreciating nature Saturday, Aug. 27, 2022, at Hopkins Hollow in Milwaukee, Wis. *Ebony Cox / Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

"There are so many interesting biomes within this space that don't exist in other nature spaces, especially because it's 18 acres," Patterson said.

Sitting on benches at the intersection of those biomes in the hollow cut by Lincoln Creek, trees blocked out most of the sounds and sights of the city around us.

“We thought this would be a good spot for people to have some respite and witness the waterfall, because once you get around here, traffic kind of quiets down. It’s a little pocket of calmness over here,” she said.

That calmness is in the middle of an 880-acre stretch of property known as the 30th Street Corridor that has been at the center of redevelopment efforts over the past decade.

The corridor, between 27th and 35th streets from Hampton Avenue to Highland Avenue, was once home to manufacturing giants like A.O. Smith, Badger Meter and Briggs & Stratton with good-paying jobs that fueled stable middle class neighborhoods. But since those companies left and took those jobs with them, the area has struggled to replace them and poverty and crime began to take hold.



Lincoln Creek flows north through Hopkins Hollow on Monday, Sept. 26, 2022. Nearby Nature and community volunteers have built a short demonstration trail through the property and are working with the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District to restore the land. *Chelsey Lewis And James Nelson/Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

Now a handful of groups are trying to reverse that trend, including The 30th Street Industrial Corridor Corp (The Corridor), a nonprofit dedicated to neighborhood revitalization and economic development; Community Within the Corridor, a development with apartments and commercial space in the former Briggs & Stratton complex; and the Rails to Trails Conservancy, which is working with The Corridor and other partners to bring a 6.7-mile paved trail and linear park to the corridor.

That trail would run along the railroad tracks just east of Lincoln Creek. Patterson hopes one day a footbridge would link Hopkins Hollow with that trail so people could park or walk their bikes across and find respite in the hollow.

The property's benefits extend beyond rest and relaxation, too. More greenspace and wetlands in the city can help remediate flooding — and wastewater overflows into Lake Michigan and other area waterways like Milwaukee experienced in September. And well maintained greenspace can also increase property values for those who live nearby.

Those who live nearby are the key to this space, and both Patterson and Thomas stressed that engaging with community members about the property and what they wanted to see there was vital to Nearby Nature's mission.

Patterson said some community members hope to host more events there.

"One guy wanted to do a barbecue down there," she said. "He wanted to have more community gatherings in the space and not just on the perimeter, because a lot of times people will walk on the outside but it's not as inviting to come around the corner."

Patterson, who studied fashion design and fine art in college and is a working artist in addition to working for Nearby Nature, hopes adding some art to the exterior will help with that and make Hopkins Hollow even more representative of the power of restoring natural spaces in the city.

"This specific space, I think, highlights how the intersectionality of community restoration, culture and art can succeed," Patterson said. "(The four biomes) coexisting reflects the potential of us, as humans, coexisting. The most diverse spaces are on these edges of our communities and within nature ... everything flourishes the best within the diverse space."

More information: Nearby Nature is inviting people to join Bahauddeen, a community- based public artist, in making peace posts for the Hopkins Hollow trailhead from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Oct. 8 at Banner High School, 4675 N. 35th St.

The demonstration trail in Hopkins Hollow is at 4410 N. Hopkins St. For more on Nearby Nature and upcoming events, see nearbynaturemke.org

Contact Chelsey Lewis at clewis@journal sentinel.com. Follow her on Twitter at @chelseylew and @TravelMJS and Facebook at Journal Sentinel Travel