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CONFLUENCE

Spring 2025 Newsletter

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TLC AND FARMING COMMUNITIES WORK HAND IN HAND

As I write, spring is on the way. A rainstorm roused frogs, bluebirds peer into nest boxes, and trout lilies emerge at TLC preserves like Johnston Mill. Soon, we'll enjoy one of the rites of summer – visiting our favorite farmers market in search of fresh tomatoes and corn – and hoping they don't sell out before we arrive.

We all know how much passion and hard work goes into growing our food. Farmers face many obstacles, including extreme weather and the rising cost of land and equipment.

North Carolina and the Triangle are losing farms at an alarming rate. According to the American Farmland Trust, our state ranks second in the nation for agricultural land lost to development. The hardest-hit counties in the country include Johnston and Wake. Farming is the state's main economic driver, and the loss of farmland decreases our food security, degrades wildlife habitat, and removes water quality and flooding buffers.

That's why TLC is committed to supporting farming communities by protecting and providing access to farmland in our region. Please enjoy the articles in this issue that highlight our work:

- 🌱 The Good Ground Initiative, a TLC project to increase farmland protection and address disparities in farmland ownership, is featured on page 10.
- 🌱 See how TLC focuses on connectivity with the protection of the 64-acre Hedges Farm in Johnston County on page 4.
- 🌱 Our Farm Program at the Bailey and Sarah Williamson Preserve in Wake and Johnston Counties continues to grow as you can see on page 8.

To see the Williamson program in action, please join us for the inaugural Land and Harvest Fest on Saturday, June 14, from 12-4 PM (see page 9). Plan to come early, before the tomatoes sell out! And thank you, as always, for your commitment to protecting the beautiful Triangle region.



Sandy Sweitzer, Executive Director



Hannah Royal monitoring a farm easement. Photo by TLC Staff



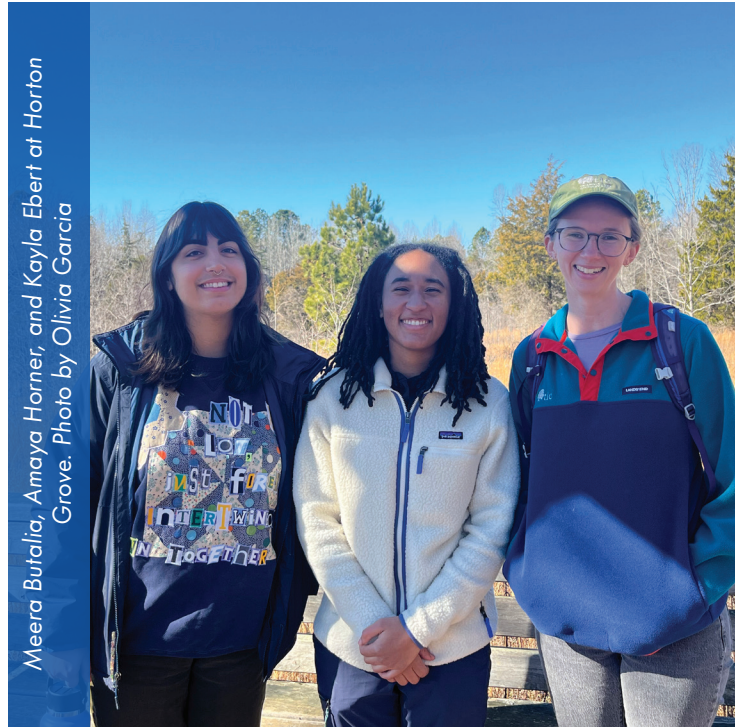
Nick Adams at the Williamson prescribed burn. Photo by Olivia Garcia



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Meera Butalia, Amaya Horner, and Kayla Ebert at Horton Grove. Photo by Olivia Garcia



Luke Whiteside with an invasive autumn olive (*Elaeagnus umbellata*) branch. Photo by TLC Staff



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HONORING A FAMILY LEGACY THROUGH CONSERVATION IN JOHNSTON COUNTY



Old barn on the Hedges Farm in Johnston County. Photo by Brenna Thompson

Conserving land helps protect wildlife and natural resources forever, and it can also preserve and honor the legacy of those who cherished it. In 2024, the Hedges family realized these goals when they worked with TLC to conserve 64 acres of historic farmland in Johnston County. The protection of the Hedges Farm builds on a previous partnership with the Cullman/Hedges family. In 2016, they donated a conservation easement on an adjacent 75-acre forest in honor of a family matriarch who loved the land and the county.

TLC's collaboration with Hugh Cullman began with his desire to honor the memory of his wife, Nan Ogburn Cullman. When he donated the first easement in 2016, daughter Kate Hedges told the story of her mother's family farm and how her mother was "increasingly protective of her land as she saw the inevitable impacts of change and development."

Hugh Cullman has since passed, but his and Nan's commitment to their farm lives on through the permanent protection of the now 139 acres of forest and farmland along Middle Creek, an important conservation priority area for TLC.

Much of the Hedges property is designated as farmland of statewide importance and its soil is considered exceptional for productive agriculture – critical in a county that ranks in the top 20 in the nation for farmland under threat of development.

Beyond farmland, this property also plays a vital role in safeguarding clean drinking water and natural habitats. Together with the existing Nan Ogburn Forest and another TLC-conserved property on the other side of Middle Creek, the protection of the Hedges Farm creates 303 acres of connected land that provide a refuge for fragile and threatened species such as the Neuse River Waterdog. One of the rarest salamanders in the Southeast, the Neuse River Waterdog is found only in the Neuse and Tar-Pamlico River basins.

In a rapidly developing region, this incredible swath of land will continue to support both human and wildlife communities for generations to come, thanks to the Hedges family's generosity and desire to honor the memory of Hugh and Nan Cullman.

"In conserving this farm, we save an important part of our family's story, but also the story of Johnston County," said Kate Hedges. "Being part of a growing conservation effort ensures that our children and their children have stories that include farms that grow our food, help clean our air and water, and sustain our families."



Scan this QR Code to read *Honoring a Family Legacy Through Conservation in Johnston County* in its entirety.

LEE COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS **COMMITTS TO PRESERVING FARMS**

The Lee County Board of Commissioners has invested in the future of farmland by voting to adopt a new conservation easement policy, establishing an Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Fund.

“This was a significant win for the future of agriculture and working lands across Lee County. The Board of Commissioners has demonstrated a meaningful commitment to the future of farms of all sizes, along with the farmers and farm families that operate them,” expressed Dr. Bill Stone of the N.C. Cooperative Extension-Lee County Center and the Lee County Agriculture Advisory Board, who spoke at the board hearing.

The new policy establishes an initial fund of \$340,610 using “roll back” taxes from land coming out of Present Use Value (PUV) over the last two years. Rollback, or deferred, taxes are generated when agricultural land is taken out of the PUV program, most commonly when it is sold for development. The new fund will reinvest the taxes back into farmland preservation through conservation easements.

Also approved were revisions to the existing farmland preservation ordinance. While maintaining their commitment to the Voluntary Agricultural District (VAD) program, the board added the option for landowners to participate in an enhanced version of the program (EVAD), which requires a ten-year irrevocable commitment from the landowner to keep the land in agricultural use. Farms smaller than five acres are now also able to qualify for the benefits of both VAD and EVAD, reflecting the changing dynamics of local agriculture and increase of small farms in the county.

This decision is timely, as Lee County is projected to lose up to 30% of its farmland to development by 2040, according to a report by the American Farmland Trust. North Carolina ranks second in the country



Lee County farmland. Photo by Melissa Clunan

for projected farmland loss, resulting in many counties increasing their efforts to balance rapid growth with preserving working lands.

Policies like this in Wake and Johnston counties have allowed TLC to protect over 1,000 acres of farmland, with many more projects in process. Lee County’s commitment will create opportunities and farmer resources to expand TLC’s farmland protection. TLC’s focus in Lee has mainly been on protecting land along the Cape Fear and Deep Rivers, including helping to conserve the historic Endor Iron Furnace.

“The adoption of this policy and creation of the Fund will be a valuable tool in the County’s toolkit where private landowners wish to voluntarily preserve their family’s farmland,” said Jimmy Randolph, CEO of the Sanford Area Growth Alliance and TLC board member. “It will empower farmers to resist rising development pressures, while advancing the public’s goal of maintaining the open spaces which are an essential and attractive element of life in Lee County.”



Scan this QR code to read about an example of a TLC farmland protection project in Wake County that utilized similar funding from rollback taxes.



TLC Staff visiting the Johnston County property along Black Creek. Photo by TLC Staff

PROTECTING LAND ACROSS THE TRIANGLE

In 2024, TLC surpassed our goal to protect 25,000 acres of land in the Triangle by 2025 a year early. This strategic goal, set in 2018, aimed to double TLC's pace of conservation, an increasingly urgent need due to the rising pressure of development and growth across the region. Thanks to expanded capacity and stronger partnerships with local and state governments, conservation organizations, and community supporters, TLC is continuing to raise the bar as a local leader in conservation.

Land protection provides many benefits to the community, including safeguarding clean water, protecting natural habitats, supporting local farms and food, and connecting people to nature. Read on to learn how recent TLC conservation projects are helping create a healthier and more vibrant Triangle for everyone to enjoy.

SAVING JOHNSTON COUNTY'S NATURAL LANDSCAPE

Farms, forests, and wetlands in Johnston County are disappearing fast, but through community collaboration TLC is working to protect the county's critical natural areas. TLC recently conserved over 300 acres of land along the Neuse River in the Lowgrounds conservation area near Smithfield, protecting wetlands, bottomland hardwood forest, and cypress ponds. The property's diverse habitats create an ideal space for migratory waterfowl, wild turkey, and several reptile and amphibian species.

Containing large stretches of land along the Neuse River and Black Creek, these riparian buffers not only provide important habitat, they also help improve water quality and strengthen flood resilience for downstream communities. Later this year, TLC plans to transfer the land to Johnston County for future public use and connections to the Mountains-to-Sea Trail.

PRESERVING WAKE COUNTY'S AGRICULTURAL HERITAGE

A landowner generously donated a conservation easement to TLC that permanently protects approximately 87 acres of Wake County farmland and working forest.

The property is adjacent to an additional 125 acres of previously preserved land, which combined creates a connected stretch of almost 213 acres of farmland in a rapidly developing area of Wake County.

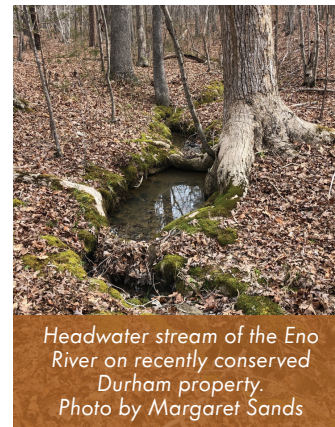
This property is located just north of Wake County's Marks Creek Rural Landscape, a historic area that is home to TLC's Williamson Preserve, as well as a mix of pastures, old barns, forests, historic homes, and rural churches that offer a stark contrast to nearby Raleigh.



CONSERVING CLEAN WATER IN DURHAM COUNTY

TLC recently placed an easement on 32 acres in northern Durham County, conserving vital forest within the Upper Neuse River Basin (learn more on page 11). The stretch of 900 feet of stream on the property is part of the headwater streams of the Eno River Watershed, which eventually flow into Falls Lake. Protecting the habitat around this water source provides natural filters that reduce the potential run-off of pollutants and sediment into drinking water.

Adjacent to TLC-protected land owned by the Earthseed Land Collective, this parcel will continue to be managed as a forest. This conservation corridor will help encourage native species to thrive in a relatively densely populated part of Durham.



PARTNERING TO CREATE A REFUGE IN ORANGE COUNTY

This spring marked the culmination of an important multi-year conservation partnership in Orange County. A conservation easement, jointly held by TLC and Eno River Association, was officially established at Bluestem Conservation Cemetery in Cedar Grove, permanently protecting Bluestem's forests, grassland, and pond habitat.

A unique nonprofit, Bluestem is both an intentionally managed public nature preserve and a conservation cemetery where natural burial is integrated into the care and protection of the land's natural resources. Visitors to the 87-acre preserve will find a serene 3.5-mile trail network, quiet places for reflection, and opportunities to witness conservation in action as Bluestem staff work to restore grasslands and early successional habitats.



Learn more about the Bluestem easement by scanning this QR code.



Walnut Hill Way flower field at Williamson Preserve. Photo by Don Kinney

CREATING A FARM COMMUNITY AT WILLIAMSON PRESERVE

Walking around the Bailey and Sarah Williamson Preserve on a chilly January day, Farm Coordinator Heather Szaro and AmeriCorps member Taylor Wolfe enthusiastically describe the innovative work taking place at this TLC preserve. Not far from the thrumming highway, Williamson is a rarity in the Triangle - a 447-acre property with a mix of farm fields, forests, and ponds, along with 16 miles of walking and mountain biking trails that connect to the Neuse River Greenway and the Mountains-to-Sea Trail. An open-air timber framed pavilion sits near barns, a tobacco curing house, trails, and an old wooden church with green shutters. Built by craftsmen in 2023, it incorporates wood harvested using draft horses from a restoration project at another TLC property, the pavilion serves as an agricultural education area and will eventually host a farmers market.

The complex history of this property that once housed Walnut Hill, one of the largest plantations in Wake County, is described extensively on signage displayed at the preserve (and can be found on the TLC website by scanning the QR code to the right). The stewardship of the land took a positive turn when the Williamson family inherited a portion of the property in the 1930s. The family grew tobacco there until 1967, when they shifted to raising cattle and growing row crops.



"Betty Brandt Williamson and her sister Sally Greaser were very dedicated to conserving the farm and honoring the family's farming legacy," says Leigh Ann Hammerbacher, Director of Land Protection and Stewardship East. "TLC staff worked with the Williamson family for about 20 years to find a way to protect the land. In 2013, the sisters sold 405 acres to TLC in a bargain sale and later, Sally donated 38 acres outright, including the church, some fields, and several other structures."

The preserve is home to a program that is unique for a land trust. "As a way to combat rapid farmland loss in the county, we designated 130 acres at Williamson to be utilized by the next generation of farmers," says Hammerbacher. "It's an accelerator program in partnership with

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"People farm because it speaks to their soul and they feel passionate about it..."

- Heather Szaro,
TLC Farm Coordinator

Wake County, where new and beginning farmers can scale-up operations without having to invest in buying farmland."

"It's extremely difficult to make a living as a farmer," says Szaro, who has a

degree in sustainable agriculture and experience managing several farms. "Farmland ownership is at its lowest in modern history. Because of high land prices most farmers who own their land either inherited it or inherited the money to purchase it."

"People farm because it speaks to their soul and they feel passionate about it, but it's bleak for new farmers: equipment is expensive, and



Stewardship Manager Hannah Royal, former TLC Summer Intern Lauren Faye Welsh, and Good Ground Manager Kierra Hyman harvesting chickasaw plums from Project Pando's native seedlings. Photo by Heather Szaro

small farmers don't have the same financial opportunities as big farmers. Our program helps guarantee success by mitigating barriers; for example, we offer educational workshops and provide equipment like a shared tractor."

Currently four farmers are based at Williamson, including Project Pando, the nonprofit arm of Leaf & Limb. With the mission of connecting people with trees, Project Pando staff grow thousands of native tree seedlings on 17 acres at Williamson. They also plant Piedmont prairies and create pocket forests with over 80 native species.

Stopping by a field, Szaro reflects on the allure of farming: "It's empowering to plant a seed, nurture a plant, harvest a fruit, and nourish your family and your community. It changes the way you think about food." With the first harvest festival in June, the Triangle community will have a chance to experience this special magic, found only on a farm, for themselves.

- Article by Ida Phillips,
Confluence Contributor



TLC Farm Coordinator Heather Szaro, AmeriCorps member Taylor Wolfe, and Szaro's dog Cricket at Williamson Preserve. Photo by Ida Phillips



View of the Agriculture Pavilion. Photo by Ida Phillips

CONNECTING PEOPLE WITH NATURE

THE LAND & HARVEST FESTIVAL

June 14, 2025 • 12 – 4 P.M.

We hope you can join TLC at this inaugural event which will feature a farmers market with local produce and artists, a food and environmental expo, food trucks and a beer tent, music, guided hikes, and plant and tree sales. Learn more at triangleland.org/events, or scan the QR code below.





Members of the Good Ground Committee visiting Earthseed Land Collective in Durham. Photo by Olivia Garcia

EXPANDING THE IMPACT OF THE **GOOD GROUND** INITIATIVE

TLC's Good Ground Initiative (GGI) is an innovative conservation program working to protect rapidly disappearing farmland while also addressing the disparities of landownership in agriculture.

Using conservation tools like Buy-Protect-Sell, TLC purchases working farms and forests and permanently protects them with a conservation easement that restricts the option to develop. These restrictions decrease the property's sale price, allowing TLC to sell conserved property to GGI participants at a reduced value. After completing a complicated transfer and working with our first conservation buyer in 2024, TLC is working to protect and transfer two projects in 2025.

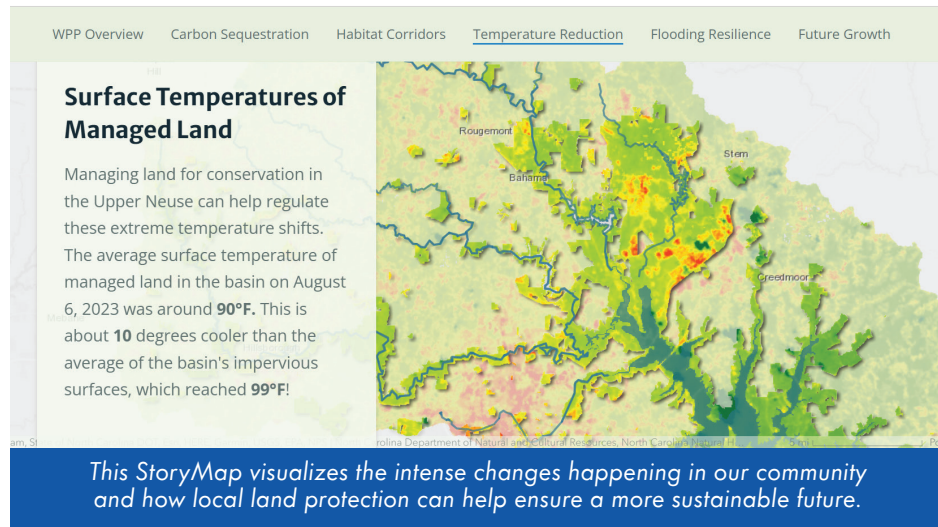
In addition to opening more pathways to land ownership in the Triangle, GGI also offers participants educational opportunities. TLC launched a program in 2024 called Partnerships for Land Access, Conservation & Equity (PLACE). Partnering with the Rural Advancement Foundation International (RAFI), the Croatan Institute, the Black Family Land Trust, and others, the PLACE program invites participants to explore the responsibilities of buying and stewarding conserved land. Initially a three-part virtual workshop, PLACE has since expanded into a series of educational opportunities hosted by TLC and partners. In October 2024, TLC hosted a "Conservation & Farm Business Management" program at the Bailey and Sarah Williamson Preserve. The session covered conservation basics for working farms and forests, as well as resources and support made available by The Tennie Group, a local tax and accounting firm that worked with TLC on the event.

PLACE has engaged over 30 participants, with more events to come. TLC looks forward to more collaborations with our partners in helping local land seekers on their journey to becoming landowners.

MAPPING WATERSHED PROTECTION BENEFITS IN THE UPPER NEUSE RIVER BASIN

The Upper Neuse River Basin, which drains to Falls Lake, has long been a major focus of conservation efforts in the Triangle. Since 2003, the Watershed Protection Program (formerly known as the Upper Neuse Clean Water Initiative), funded primarily by the City of Raleigh, has made it possible for several organizations, including TLC, to conserve over 15,000 acres of land within the river basin's 770 square mile area.

Protecting land within this priority area has numerous benefits for the community. Most importantly, the Upper Neuse River Basin supplies drinking water to over half a million people in Raleigh.



Land protection in the Upper Neuse also strengthens the Triangle region in the face of a changing climate. Last year, Chloe Ochocki, TLC's former Conservation Planner, created an ArcGIS StoryMap that analyzes the climate benefits of conservation in this priority area. TLC completed this analysis thanks to funding from the Watershed Protection Program

and the Open Space Institute. Earlier this year, this incredible work was recognized as a finalist for Esri's 2024 ArcGIS StoryMaps Competition – a global contest celebrating the best of place-based storytelling.

Using a variety of data from sources including The Nature Conservancy and the US Geological Survey, Ochocki was able to quantify and map four key climate benefits of land conservation: carbon sequestration, habitat connectivity, temperature reduction, and flood resilience. From these maps, viewers can easily see how critical natural areas help mitigate rising temperatures, more destructive weather events, and increased development.

Ochocki was one of four featured speakers at TLC's Wild Ideas – Habitats: Our Home in October 2024, where she presented her findings and StoryMap to a live audience. You can access the StoryMap by scanning the QR code with your camera app.



Water from Brumley Preserve eventually funnels into the Eno River and then into Falls Lake – an important drinking source for thousands of Triangle residents.
Photo by Elise Everett



PINES STUDENTS STAY CONNECTED TO TLC

In January, the Pathways into Natural Environments and Science (PINES) Fellowship began its fourth year by welcoming five returning students and six new students from Knightdale High School. The PINES program is a paid fellowship that connects students to opportunities in the outdoor career field while building community in nature.

Each year, a few students take on extra responsibility by becoming Student Leaders who shape the program by attending leadership development trainings and planning unique meetings. Past Student Leaders coordinated plant ID walks, geologist talks, and presentations about sustainable small-scale agriculture. This year's Leaders organized meetings with TLC stewardship staff, a talk from the director of a reforestation initiative, and a wild foraging session. As the PINES program grows, it is sustained by the continued commitment of Fellows.

PINES graduates often collaborate with staff to strengthen the program and contribute to TLC's larger work. Last summer, graduates Ava and Julio returned as Land Stewardship interns at Williamson Preserve – a program that will continue this summer. They were led by Umar Muhammad, Land Stewardship Associate East, who participated in a similar high school program at Lookout Mountain Conservancy (LMC) in Tennessee. The students expanded their understanding of forestry and conservation through prescribed burn planning, creating an invasive plant management plan, and assisting with property monitoring. Whether as returning Fellows, Student Leaders, or college interns—each student contributes to the welcoming community of PINES.

As an added professional development opportunity, Julio and Umar, along with staff from LMC, gave presentations about their stewardship internships at the 2025 Southeast Land Conservation Conference.



The Spring 2025 cohort of PINES students. Photo by Kayla Ebert

The workshop focused on the effects of nature on social, emotional, and intellectual growth as well as the importance of youth engagement in conservation. Thanks to donations from generous supporters, we are pleased to continue engaging youth in our communities through PINES, and support graduates as they take their first steps into their chosen professions.

TRAIL PETIQUETTE AT TLC PRESERVES

For many people, there's no better trail companion than their beloved pup. While dogs are welcome on TLC trails, it's important for owners to follow a few key rules that make a huge difference in protecting local trails, wildlife, and water.

LEASH YOUR DOG AT ALL TIMES.

Keeping your pet on a leash that is no longer than six feet is critical when visiting TLC trails. Off-leash dogs can cause several issues that impact ecosystems. Pets wandering off the trail can harm the many fragile habitats and species found at TLC-protected properties. Leashes ensure that your pet stays safe and in your sight!

ALWAYS PICK UP YOUR DOG'S WASTE.

Pet waste poses a major problem for our ecosystems and can lead to an excess of pathogens, nitrogen, and phosphorous in an area, which can negatively impact native plants and pollute our watershed - including the drinking water we all rely on.

Bagging your dog's waste is just the first step - it's also vital to take the bag with you when you leave the trails. Discarded poop bags are not only an unpleasant sight, but most bags do not decompose, creating additional litter in our shared public spaces.

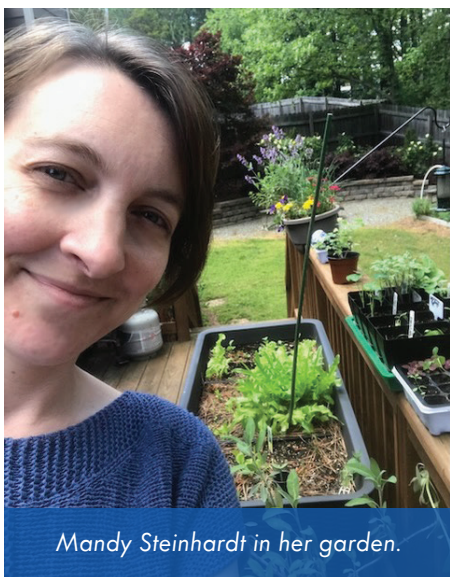
RESPECT OTHER HIKERS AND WILDLIFE.

It's best to use caution around other preserve visitors - not everyone is comfortable around dogs and it's hard to predict how other dogs will react to your pet. Yielding the trail to others helps create space for everyone - you and your dog, fellow hikers, cyclists, trail runners, and those with small children. This way you can easily take control of your pet if necessary and help everyone enjoy themselves outside.



TLC DONOR MAKES A COMMITMENT TO FUTURE GENERATIONS

Mandy Steinhardt's passion for protecting the environment began during her childhood in Philadelphia. "My mom was always environmentally conscious," she recalls. "I remember sorting recycling into eight or ten bags and taking them to the recycling center. I think I got some of my commitment to the environment from her. I've always felt like it's important to preserve our natural resources and all the plants and animals and make sure they're available for future generations."



Mandy Steinhardt in her garden.

A strategic futurist at Cisco, Mandy relocated to Raleigh with her family from south Florida twenty years ago. Drawn by the city's famous oaks and family-friendly environment, the family was excited to move to an area that offers great opportunities for hiking, biking, and gardening. But after moving here, Mandy became concerned by the fast pace of land development.

"It's a little scary," she says. "One of the things we loved about this community was the natural

landscape. But now development is making it difficult to find places where you feel connected to nature and the outdoors."

When Mandy and her husband started working on their estate plan, she saw an opportunity to contribute to an environmental group that is saving the Triangle's natural areas.

"I researched a lot of charities in the area because I wanted to make sure my donation would be used wisely," she recalls. "I decided on TLC for several reasons. I like the way the organization is making land accessible to the community and helping farmers have access to land. And I found out through Charity Navigator that TLC is very effective in terms of how much of their budget goes directly to programs versus overhead. When you work so hard for your money you don't want to give it to someone who will mishandle it."

Mandy hopes that sharing the story of her decision to become a Legacy Donor will inspire other TLC members to do the same. "Land is so expensive now," she says. "There's no way that I alone could purchase a nature preserve. But as part of this organization, I know I'm contributing to saving the Triangle's special places every day." And, as a certified career and life coach, she hopes to one day host women's circles in these vibrant natural spaces.



"I've always felt like it's important to preserve our natural resources and all the plants and animals and make sure they're available for future generations."

- Mandy Steinhardt,
TLC Legacy Donor

There are many ways to include TLC in your estate plans, including through TLC's partnership with FreeWill, a free online resource that can help you write a will quickly and easily. If you have already included TLC in your plans, please let us know so we can celebrate your commitment. To learn more, scan this QR code or contact Christine Wilson, Director of Advancement, at cwilson@triangleland.org, or 919-908-0059.



UPCOMING EVENTS

VOLUNTEER APPRECIATION EVENING AT BRUMLEY PRESERVE

Tuesday, May 20, 6 – 8 PM

MOTH NIGHTS AT BRUMLEY PRESERVE

Saturday, May 31, 8 – 11 PM

Future dates: July 26 and September 27

FIRST FRIDAYS UNDER THE STARS SERIES AT THREE BEARS PRIVATE PRESERVE

Held each first Friday of the month, with upcoming events held from 7 – 10 PM

LAND AND HARVEST FEST AT WILLIAMSON PRESERVE

Saturday, June 14, 12 – 4 PM

BIOBLITZ AT WHITE PINES PRESERVE

Sunday, August 10, 9 AM – 3 PM

CONNECTING PEOPLE WITH NATURE

Looking for more ways to connect with TLC? We offer free hikes and outdoor events each month, as well as many volunteer opportunities to help care for local lands and trails. Scan the QR Code for more information.





Pinxterbloom azalea (*Rhododendron periclymenoides*) at Williamson Preserve. Photo by Christine Wilson



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