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TRIANGLE LAND CONSERVANCY

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CONFLUENCE

Spring 2026 Newsletter

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TLC's Margaret Sands and Emma Childs and Chatham County Soil & Water Conservation District staff with the Stensvad family celebrating the protection of their 59-acre Chatham County farm. Photo by Florencia Loncán

TOGETHER WE SAVE LAND

Triangle Land Conservancy protects and restores land in perpetuity. But our work is more than acres on a map–it is also about the people who love the land today and the generations who will find joy and health on them tomorrow.

Conservation in the Triangle succeeds because of our collective effort. Our staff brings dedication and expertise every day. Our board provides leadership and vision. Volunteers give their time and energy. TLC donors and local and state governments invest in a future they believe in.

Together, we are working towards creating a region where everyone can experience the benefits of protected land–clean water, recreation and respite, wildlife habitats, and local farms.

But we are at a critical moment. Rapid population growth, skyrocketing land prices, and a climate crisis are threatening our farms, forests, and grasslands.

Once land is developed, it is gone forever.

That urgency fuels *Force for Nature: A Campaign to Protect the Triangle's Land and Water for All.* Now in its final months, this multi-year fundraising effort is already helping to build a healthier and more vibrant region.

We enter this final phase guided by our new strategic plan and fueled by generous donors who have already allowed TLC to accelerate land protection, expand habitat restoration, and inspire more people to connect with the outdoors.

"ONCE LAND IS DEVELOPED, **IT IS GONE FOREVER.**"

- Sandy Sweitzer,
TLC Executive Director

With your support, by 2030 we can protect **another** 4,000 acres of wild and working lands, build new trails, open our eighth nature preserve, restore fragile ecosystems, and educate and inspire many more people of all ages across the region.

Land is what brings us together, but it is people who sustain this work.

Thank you for helping to create a better, greener, and more vibrant tomorrow for all in the Triangle.

Sandy Sweitzer, Executive Director



Butterfly and caterpillar on milkweed at Brumley Preserve. Photo by Kim Gray

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Cover Photo: Eastern bluebird (Sialia sialis) *at Williamson Preserve. By Don Kinney*

WORKING LANDS, LASTING IMPACT: 75 ACRES CONSERVED IN LEE COUNTY



Hunter and Aaron Ayers on their property. Photo courtesy of the Ayers.

With increasing farmland loss across North Carolina, the work of TLC matters more than ever. In December 2025, TLC protected approximately 75 acres of working lands on the Ayers Family Farm in southern Lee County, marking the first TLC-purchased agricultural easement in the county.

According to the most recent USDA Agricultural Census for Lee County, farmland acreage declined by 11% from 2017 – 2022.

During that same period, the total number of farms increased, showcasing that farm properties are being sold and subdivided. Coming from farming families, the Ayers knew early on that they wanted to protect their land for the long term.

Melissa Clunan, TLC's Land Protection Manager, worked closely with **Hunter and Aaron Ayers** throughout the easement process and witnessed firsthand their commitment to farming.

"I love meeting the landowners that care about their land," she said. "The Ayers are unique in that they are young farmers who know they want to farm their entire careers. They are committed to keeping this land exactly as it is."

"THE BIGGEST ADVICE WE CAN GIVE ANYONE LOOKING TO PROTECT THEIR LAND IS TO **DO IT,"**

- The Ayers,
Ayers Family Farm

That dedication is rooted in a deep respect for Lee County's agricultural history.

"The hard work put into this sandy land is evident, and we want to continue the legacy started by not only our ancestors, but all of Lee County farmers," explained Hunter and Aaron Ayers.

The easement was funded by the **NC Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund** (ADFP) with a generous 25% bargain sale from the Ayers. This is the first project that utilized Lee County's **Farmland Preservation and Protection Fund**, which helped cover transaction costs associated with the sale. As funding sources become increasingly competitive, county support is more important than ever. Local investment in working lands strengthens applications for additional grants like ADFP, increasing a project's likelihood of success.

"I think the timing of the county's investment is really significant because it is proactive," said Melissa. "The county commissioners and the community can see that growth is ramping up similarly to other counties in our region."

Bounded on three sides by water, Lee County sits at the intersection of the North Carolina Piedmont, Coastal plain, and Sandhills regions. The Ayers property is a combination of crop fields and mixed hardwood and pine forest, and according to the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), 80% of the soils in this easement are prime soil or soils of statewide importance, meaning that they are among the most productive for agriculture.

The Ayers grow a wide variety of produce, field corn, and annual hay, while also raising livestock. Unlike typical large-scale row crop farming, their small-scale produce operation feeds directly back into the community. By selling at their local farmers market and at Piggly Wiggly, the Ayers emphasize the importance of community-based agriculture.

"We strive to farm with tomorrow in mind," the Ayers shared. "Some of these practices include cover crops, rotational grazing, crop rotation as well as maintaining water ways and proper forestry management."



The Ayers Family Farm grows produce, such as collards, to be sold at local farmers markets and grocery stores. Photo by Melissa Clunan



Hunter Ayers and her mom at TLC's inaugural Land & Harvest Festival. Photo by Don Kinney

Much of TLC's previous work in Lee County focused on protecting land along the Cape Fear and Deep Rivers, as well as helping to conserve the historic Endor Iron Furnace. This increase in county support will provide TLC and farmers with more resources to protect Lee County's rural character and farms, at a time when the county is projected to lose up to 30% of its farmland to development pressures by 2040.

"The biggest advice we can give anyone looking to protect their land is to do it," the Ayers concluded. "As a community we need to realize that working together to perpetuate woodlands and farmland is the only way to be successful. The value added to the tract for the next generation is immense."

Thanks to the Ayers' dedication and their continued support of TLC's mission, Ayers Family Farm will be conserved forever.

BUILDING TRAILS AND COMMUNITY AT OLD CREEDMOOR NATURE PRESERVE



TLC Associate Land Manager, East, Umar Muhammad, worked with Engineers Without Borders to build the preserve's accessible bridges. Photo by Florencia Loncán

What happens when conservationists, mountain bikers, developers, and engineers work together to conserve land? This year, this collaboration will come to life with the opening of **Old Creedmoor**, TLC's eighth public nature preserve. The 65-acre property in Wake County protects not only pristine forest habitat and critical streams, but also a sustainably designed multi-use trail network for hikers and bikers.

Originally slated to be developed into 40+ houses, this property came to TLC's attention in 2020 when a developer reached out to TLC after recognizing the land's conservation and recreation potential.

With funding from the **City of Raleigh Watershed Protection Program** and **Wake County Open Space**, TLC was able to purchase the property, which will provide habitat for native plants, protect clean water, and offer over four miles of walking and mountain biking trails.

Much of Old Creedmoor was home to an unofficial trail system that mountain bikers and hikers had used for years.

"My first impression was that these bandit trails that are already established were in good shape," said **Umar Muhammad**, TLC's Associate Land Manager, East, after exploring the site for the first time. "I went out after a rain and thought, okay, I can work with these trails."

Even with an existing trail network, building a sustainable system is no small feat. The process begins with thoughtful planning and design that considers environmental impacts, accessibility, and long-term stability. Key collaborations helped ensure that these trails would serve both the community and the land for years to come.

Over the past several years, Umar, other TLC staff, and dedicated volunteers have transformed Old Creedmoor into a safe, sustainable, official TLC preserve. While not starting from scratch, many improvements were made to meet the high-quality standards of TLC's other multi-use trail systems.

Triangle Off-Road Cyclists (TORC) was a key partner for this project. TORC volunteers regularly help maintain TLC trails at Brumley and Williamson Preserves by assessing conditions, improving water flow, shaping trail beds, and ensuring that bike trails are safe to ride.

Involving TORC early in the planning of Old Creedmoor was a priority. Through many volunteer workdays, Umar got firsthand



Umar Muhammad, and Stewardship Intern and PINES alum, Julio Rodriguez, are working to ready the preserve for opening. Photo by Florencia Loncán

feedback from local mountain bikers—make the difficulty level higher than other TLC preserves. "They like the elevation change and the hard climbs, but they wanted to do more things," Umar explained.

This input has led to the creation of the preserve's alternate routes. Rather than removing pre-existing community-built features like jumps and skinnies (a narrow, elevated surface), several are being incorporated or refined to offer different ways to ride the trails. "We'll utilize rocks or what we have there to make a more advanced and enjoyable route for more advanced users while also protecting the conservation values of the property," said Umar.

Another critical partner was the Research Triangle chapter of **Engineers Without Borders** (EWB). Since the preserve's streams flow into Falls Lake—a vital source of the region's drinking water—conserving this land was a priority for TLC. To maintain stream health and to help visitors access the trails safely, Umar worked with EWB volunteers to design and construct six bridges for both hikers and cyclists.

Mark Jolly, one of the volunteer engineers, explained the project's focus on accessibility. "The bridges were designed and built to be compatible with adapted cycles—typically three-wheeled cycles that are operated by paraplegics," he said. The team consulted with local nonprofit **North Carolina Adapted Sports**, which resulted in widening the bridges to at least five feet and adding small railings to prevent tires from going off the edges.

"The support from the community has been amazing," said Umar. "I'm so thankful for the partners and volunteers who have helped with everything from rerouting trails to donating funds for the acquisition."



Old Creedmoor Preserve will have several alternate routes with bike features like jumps and skinnies. Photo by Florencia Loncán

This preserve will soon open to the public, helping to fill the void left by some of the Triangle's cherished bike trails lost in recent years. Saving a former "bandit" trail system is rare, and TLC is grateful that this land will continue to be a community resource for future generations.

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Jade Shepherd, the artist behind The Perpetual Pen.

WHERE ART MEETS NATURE: LOCAL ARTISTS AND TLC CELEBRATE THE BEAUTY OF THE TRIANGLE

The natural wonders of North Carolina's Piedmont inspire many across the Triangle. Whether it's the tranquility of a flowing stream, the awe of spotting a rare bird, or the thrill of biking through the woods, these moments connect us to the land and remind us why we love this place called home. Recently, TLC has partnered with local artists who find inspiration in the flora, fauna, and habitats nearby.

FINDING MAGIC IN THE LANDSCAPE: JADE SHEPHERD

Jade Shepherd finds wonder in how alive North Carolina's landscapes feel. "The abundance of creeks, streams, and hidden bodies of water feel like the circulatory system of the land, quietly sustaining everything around it," she explained.

An artist and storyteller, Jade uses her creative talents to do good for the planet. Centering on collaborations with conservation organizations, she supports real efforts to protect vulnerable habitats and species, as well as the human communities around them. This passion led her to TLC.

"There's something incredibly powerful about knowing that the forests, waterways, and quiet spaces I walk through and draw inspiration from are actively being cared for by a local organization rooted in community," shared Jade.

Her first collaboration with TLC is hand-drawn, limited-edition stickers representing each of TLC's public nature preserves. Inspired by preserve photos, visits to the trails, and species suggestions from TLC staff, Jade infuses each design with her signature fantastical style.

"I hope people feel a sense of belonging, wonder, and connection," she concluded. "My hope is that these stickers encourage people to slow down, notice the beauty around them and feel inspired to care for and protect these spaces."

The preserve stickers will be available at upcoming TLC tabling events, and community members can also collect them as they complete TLC's Hiking Challenge.

Learn more about Jade's art on Instagram @jadesjrawingjourney and her website www.perpetualpenstudio.com

UP CLOSE IN NATURE: KATIE HAYES

Hillsborough block print artist **Katie Hayes** has always had a love for nature, stemming from a childhood dream of becoming a naturalist. Her art focuses on "place-based design," featuring specific habitats, species, and ecological relationships found in a particular place at a particular time. "I want it to feel like you're sticking your nose in nature," she explained.



Katie Hayes of New South Pattern House in her studio.

In addition to hand-carved block prints, Katie designs patterns for wallpaper and stationery, often inspired by close observation of the natural world. Recurring patterns of native plants, birds, and other wildlife come alive in her pieces, which can be seen in the design motif for TLC's *Force for Nature Gala & Art Auction* and donated wallpaper to TLC's offices at Brumley and Williamson Preserves. Katie also contributed an original print "Across the River, Otter and Bullfrog Sunset Edition" to the auction.

Katie draws inspiration from Southeast ecosystems—especially wetlands—and hopes people fall more in love with where they live through her art.

"What I'm really providing is a conduit between people and their already existing wildlife memories," Katie began. "A visual queue that when they're walking through their house, they're going to look over at their block print or wallpaper and remember that time they had a nostalgic and warm fuzzy feeling from nature."

Learn more about Katie's work at https://newsouthpatternhouse.com and on Instagram at @newsouthpatternhouse



Courtney Pernell with one of her clay love birds.

FOR THE LOVE OF TRAILS: COURTNEY PERNELL

Over Valentine's Day weekend, TLC and local potter **Courtney Pernell** invited the community to search TLC trails for handmade pottery "love birds." Courtney, owner of Bayleaf Market and the creative heart behind the event, appreciates TLC's commitment to protecting local lands. She was excited to merge her passions for trails, nature, and pottery into this special scavenger hunt to share that love with the wider community.

You can learn more about Courtney and Bayleaf Market at www.bayleafmarketraleigh.com

WE ARE TLC: **INTRODUCING NEW ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR OF PHILANTHROPY**



TLC's Associate Director of Philanthropy, Sandra Rodriguez.

"I've been struck by how deeply this community cares about conserving the natural open spaces in our region," shared **Sandra Rodriguez**, TLC's Associate Director of Philanthropy. "TLC preserves have meant so much to my family, and it's a privilege to now be part of this work."

Having worked in nonprofits her entire career, Sandra is no stranger to fundraising. After studying communications at the University of Costa Rica, she spent a short time in advertising before transitioning to nonprofit work. With the support of a Fulbright Scholarship, Sandra pursued a master's degree in environmental science at Washington State University.

Since then, she has gained experience in grantmaking, fundraising, communications, and program management across several organizations. During her time at Triangle Community Foundation, Sandra spent nearly a decade advising donors and connecting them with nonprofits aligned with their values.

"CONSERVING THESE PLACES IS ONE OF THE **MOST MEANINGFUL WAYS WE CAN INVEST IN A HEALTHIER FUTURE FOR OUR COMMUNITY."**

- Sandra Rodriguez,
TLC's Associate Director of Philanthropy

"Giving can be very transactional," she explained. "But it can also be deeply connected to the things that matter most to you."

When the position at TLC became available, Sandra knew it was the perfect fit. Since moving to North Carolina in 1998, she has been a frequent visitor to TLC preserves with her family. In her role, Sandra manages the Philanthropy team, engages directly with donors, leads fundraising initiatives, and strengthens day-to-day operations.

Her passion for conservation stems from a personal appreciation for the outdoors. She describes being in nature as a spiritual experience, naming Johnston Mill as one of her favorite places for a walk.

"I've seen how access to protected natural spaces supports people's health and well-being," she said. "Conserving these places is one of the most meaningful ways we can invest in a healthier future for our community."

As she gets to know the TLC community, Sandra has been inspired by the dedication of its supporters.

"Donors to TLC care deeply about the region and its health," she said with a smile. "They understand how vital these natural spaces are to our future."

CHEERS TO 10 YEARS, MARGARET!

By Bo Howes, Director of Conservation, West

Over 10 years ago, I had the privilege of sitting in our interviews for TLC's new Outreach and Events Coordinator. **Margaret Sands** impressed us with fantastic conservation experience and a strong educational background in environmental work.

An early interaction Margaret had with the conservation staff was the opening of the Brumley property. We envisioned this as a nice, relatively small event, hoping to have 200-300 people show up and appreciate our new nature preserve. We should have seen it coming–there were thousands of people at the event. But Margaret's plan worked and this massive event went as smoothly as can be expected and brought a multitude of new supporters to TLC.

TLC's Associate Director of Land Protection, West, Margaret Sands on a hike.



When we decided to expand our land protection staff, Margaret was a natural fit for the new position. Since that time, Margaret has developed into a land protection guru. She knows the ins and outs of finding funding for the most unlikely projects.

It has been so much fun to watch Margaret grow in her role with TLC. I am lucky to have had a ringside seat for both the personal and professional growth that she has made and look forward to seeing what the next ten years bring.

Scan here to read Margaret's full tribute article.

A DECADE OF ADVANCEMENT WITH CHRISTINE

By Sandy Sweitzer, Executive Director

"I know the perfect person for the job–you don't need to interview anyone else!" is about the best thing a new Executive Director can hear. Ten years ago, and only six months into my role as Executive Director of TLC, a colleague eagerly shared this when I announced we were looking for a new Director of Development. He was absolutely right. **Christine Wilson** has proven to be the ideal fit for a role that has grown and evolved over the past decade to keep up with her. Now the Director of Advancement, her technical expertise, strategic insight, and thoughtful leadership have fostered fundraising success that drives TLC's land protection, stewardship, education, outreach, and communications efforts.

What sets Christine apart is that she authentically cares about her staff, colleagues, and donors. It has been a joy to watch her learn, grow, and expand her team, her confidence, and her impact throughout the organization.

TLC's Director of Advancement, Christine Wilson.



Scan here to read Christine's full tribute article.



Cynthia and Steve Sollod at TLC's Fall 2025 River Society event. Photo by Emilia Brennan

LEGACY GIFTS MAKE A LASTING IMPACT

At TLC, conservation has always been more than protecting land–it's also about the people who care for these beloved places. Supporters like **Cynthia** and **Steve Sollod** remind us how powerful that commitment can be.

Members since 1991, Cynthia and Steve felt an immediate connection to TLC's mission. Cynthia has long been inspired to help protect the planet, while Steve built a career in environmental affairs, guided by a lifelong curiosity about the natural world. The Triangle has been their home for decades, and they cherish North Carolina's rich biodiversity and climate.

To preserve these landscapes they love forever, Cynthia and Steve chose to include TLC in their estate plans and are proud members of the **Longview Society**.

"What an easy way to make an impact," Cynthia shared. "If you protect land today, people will be able to enjoy it for generations."

For Steve, the decision was equally personal: "The work TLC does to conserve our local environment truly speaks to me, and I'm proud to support it."

They believe legacy gifts–in their case bequeathing their home to TLC - will ensure that future generations have places to explore, reflect, and find peace in nature. By working with TLC staff now, they have set plans in place for proceeds from the sale of their home to fund long-term environmental education and land protection in our region. While permanent land protection doesn't make sense for everyone, there are many types of legacy gifts that can make a lasting difference.

As development continues to reshape our region, thoughtful planning today can safeguard the land we treasure tomorrow. We are deeply grateful to Cynthia and Steve for their enduring support and generosity, and we invite others to consider joining them in this lasting commitment.

FORCE FOR NATURE LEGACY PLAN CHALLENGE

Alongside record-shattering fundraising goals for the *Force for Nature* campaign, TLC has invested efforts to expand our legacy giving program, the Longview Society, because our work is forever. By growing the number of families who include TLC in their estate plans, we help ensure future generations have the resources to continue to steward protected lands.

Our goal is to welcome **100 new Longview Society members by June 30, 2026**–and we're just 30 commitments away. To help us cross the finish line, longtime supporters and new Longview Society members, **Anne Stoddard** and **Ron Gallagher**, will donate **$1,000** to TLC to use now for every new Longview Society commitment–**up to $30,000!** Now is the moment to help us reach this milestone and fuel the full circle of our work. Reach out today to **Christine Wilson**, Director of Advancement, cwilson@triangleland.org or (919) 908-0059, to set your legacy plans into motion.

tlc TRIANGLE LAND CONSERVANCY | LONGVIEW SOCIETY BUILD A LEGACY

Scan here to learn more about planned giving.

COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHTS

LOCAL BUSINESS PARTNER: EASTCUT SANDWICH BAR

Eastcut Sandwich Bar has been a valued partner of TLC for many years. Founded by two East Coast natives—one from New Jersey and one from New York—who missed the classic deli sandwiches of their youth, Eastcut opened its first location in Durham in 2018 before expanding to Raleigh's Iron Works development in 2023. Their mission is to cultivate "Sandwich Utopia"— a place where team members thrive, and the community finds cheer through chef-driven, homemade food and a welcoming, neighborhood atmosphere.

Eastcut's commitment to community extends beyond great food. Each March and April, both the Durham and Raleigh locations run round-up donation campaigns, giving customers a simple way to support TLC. On Earth Day (April 22), Eastcut goes even further by donating 10% of all sales from both stores to TLC, reinforcing their focus on community empowerment and positive change. Stop by Eastcut this month to enjoy a great meal while supporting TLC at the same time.

EASTCUT
SANDWICH BAR

MEET PAT MCCULLERS: A CHAMPION FOR CONSERVATION IN THE MARKS CREEK WATERSHED

Home to rolling pastures, old barns, historic homes, and rural churches, the Marks Creek watershed area offers a striking contrast to nearby bustling Raleigh. To date, TLC has completed 32 projects in the Marks Creek area, protecting a total of 2,716 acres across Wake and Johnston counties. Many of these projects could not have been done without the dedicated support of **Pat McCullers.**

Pat is one of TLC's longest-serving volunteers and a steadfast community advocate in the Marks Creek priority area. She has championed the protection of farms, open space, and limits on uncontrolled development for over twenty years. Having lived her entire life in Shotwell Village, an unincorporated rural community in the Marks Creek Township of eastern Wake County, Pat knows firsthand about the uniqueness of Marks Creek.

"We want people to understand this is a unique area, and it behooves us all to ensure that it is protected," she shared.



Leigh Ann Hammerbacher, Heather Szaro, and local farmer Pat McCullers at the Agriculture Pavilion at Williamson Preserve. Photo by Cara Lewis

Scan to learn more about Pat McCuller's dedication to local land conservation.



TLC Environmental Education Associate, Meera Butalia tabling for Kids in Nature Day.



Board members from TLC's four decades of history came together for a board reunion last Fall. Photo by Emilia Brennan



TLC collaborated with artist Jade Shepherd from the Perpetual Pen to create new preserve stickers. Photographed here is Emma Childs, Olivia Garcia, Jade Shepherd, Sarah Grace Bindrim, and Kierra Hyman. Photo by Florencia Loncán



Sadie and Adam Walters at TLC's Fall River Society event. Photo by Emilia Brennan



Conservation Corps volunteers and TLC's Luke Whiteside with the new bridge they installed at Horton Grove. Photo by Chris Leonard



Left to right: NC Department of Natural and Cultural Resources Deputy Secretary Jeff Michael, NC State Parks Director Brian Strong, TLC's Director of Conservation Bo Howes, and Piedmont Land Conservancy Conservation Planner Palmer McIntyre at the ribbon cutting ceremony of a new boat access on the Deep River State Trail in Moncure, NC. Photo by Florencia Loncán



TriWild founder, Steven Feuerstein, with a volunteer at an MLK Day workday at Brumley Preserve. Photo by Jacob Moore

UPCOMING EVENTS

EARTH DAY GIVING CHALLENGE
April 22, all day

VOLUNTEER APPRECIATION EVENT
May 21, 6 – 8 PM
at Williamson Preserve

THE LAND & HARVEST FESTIVAL
June 13, 12 – 4 PM
at Williamson Preserve

Scan here for more upcoming TLC events.



Holman Loop at Horton Grove Preserve. Photo by Andrew Eicher