

# My Story



## Coming Back Home

Coastal Plain Forest Preserve

By Jennifer Bilger, Environmental Educator

*"People of all ages need to have a place to come back home to, a place to find peace and see the beauty and magic of our natural world."*



Being immersed in nature can be a life-altering experience; here at Silver Lake Nature Center, I have seen this unfold time and time again!

I see a child who thinks they can't have fun without playing video games arrive for his first week of summer camp, nervous and shy. Slowly as we explore the forest I see him becoming more observant and curious. As we learn how to build shelters in the woods and play a game of camouflage, I see him choose hiding spots further out into the sweetgums of the Coastal Plain. By the end of the week, he is leading a group of kids in a made up world of bartering with mica for sticks and rocks to build in the natural kids play area, and he is smiling the smile of someone transformed.

I see young girls learn they can do all the same things that boys can: they can jump in the mud



**Keystone Fund Investment:** \$228,000

**Total Public/Private Investment:** \$482,300

of our marsh, catch bass in the lake, and win capture the flag deep in our historic Delhaas Woods that are full of large willow oaks that shade us on hot summer days. I see these young girls grow up summer after summer to become counselors who then help show the

next generation the lost art of how to have fun simply playing outside.

I see exhausted parents bring their children out to our Frog Slog in the Bog programs and learn to slow down and enjoy the moment their child first catches the rare and protected leopard frog, and that parent tears up with nostalgia for their own youth spent playing outside from sunrise to dinner time.

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I see retired adults volunteer here and rediscover that the next phase of their lives can have purpose and meaning, and see them find a strong sense of community within our oasis. They take on their projects here with such pride and ownership, knowing that their tireless efforts will preserve and protect this vital natural resource for future generations to visit and discover themselves.



Places like Silver Lake Preserve are incredibly important, not just for the environmental ethics of protecting such habitats for the animals, but because we are part of nature and we have become increasingly estranged from it in today's modern society. People of all

ages need to have a place to come back home to, a place to find peace and see the beauty and magic of our natural world.

I see a woman start volunteering here when she is 92, greeting our visitors with kindness and helping them find a place here. I see a woman donate all of her time outside of her full-time job doing trail maintenance and becoming a leader. I see the gentleman whose family owned this place when it was a farm come back and wrap us in his warm stories of what this place was like 70 years ago. I see another man dedicate 40 years of his life to a career spent nurturing the wonders of our preserve, and his legacy lives on. I see a man spend a dozen of his last years on this earth removing non-native species so his beloved Pine Grove can become the magical place he longs for, a place to sit under the evergreen canopy and rest.

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