

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Boxerwood Wins State Honor – and a Federal Grant

Lexington, VA – November 18, 2015. October brought a bumper crop of good news for Boxerwood Nature Center and Woodland Garden, located just outside Lexington. As part of a new state initiative, the Commonwealth recognized Boxerwood as one of Virginia’s first “Centers of Environmental Education Excellence.” During the same month, a federal agency publicly announced Boxerwood had won a significant 3-year grant to continue its teacher professional development programs. “We’re just delighted,” said Boxerwood Board President, Paul Leonhard, “it’s a tremendous boost to know what we are doing in Rockbridge is getting the broader attention and recognition these efforts deserve.” According to Leonhard, the awards come during a financially stressful time for the organization and thus “are even greater cause for celebration.”

Boxerwood was one of fourteen organizations singled out for environmental educational excellence by the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR). Other honorees included much larger entities such as the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, the Virginia Museum of Natural History, and Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden in Richmond. DCR director Clyde Christman presented the Excellence awards during a state environmental conference held October 9 at Natural Bridge, which also received recognition.

During the awards presentation, the DCR director of Environmental Education, Mike Foreman, praised Boxerwood for its grassroots approach to encouraging stewardship, later explaining, “this recognition denotes very high standards of teaching, learning, and community support regarding the natural world.” Introducing Boxerwood to attendees, Foreman publicly highlighted the organization’s unique woodland garden, its innovative PlayTrail, and its expansive partnership with all three local school divisions for nature-based learning. He added, “we are proud of the Boxerwood staff and all they have accomplished through the years,” observing their work “contributes to a strong community and healthy quality of life for the Rockbridge area.”

That same week, a federal agency announced Boxerwood was among twenty-five organizations in Maryland and Virginia slated to receive significant federal funding for watershed education. The highly competitive \$40,000 annual grant, awarded for the next three years, is from the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration/Bay Watershed Education and Training Program (NOAA/B-WET). “The NOAA Chesapeake Bay Office is pleased to continue our investment in Boxerwood's efforts to bring meaningful watershed educational experiences to students and teachers in Rockbridge County and Lexington,” commented Andrew Larkin, the federal program officer based in Norfolk who oversees the Virginia programs.

The new award follows a previous three-year NOAA award which helped Boxerwood and local school divisions build a broad K – 8 partnership that now engages more than 130 classrooms each year in field-based learning. Those efforts resulted in nine local schools receiving state recognition for their stewardship endeavors, an honor accorded only forty-five other schools statewide. That success prepared the way for the new award, explained Boxerwood managing director, Bruce Bytnar. “It’s rare that NOAA awards a second 3-year period of funding,” he said “but our grantors understand that tiny but mighty Boxerwood functions like a community catalyst for conservation education.”

Bytnar remarked on the timeliness of the grant and its focus. Funds will help pay salaries of key staff, provide teacher training stipends, and launch new programs with Parry McCluer High School. Boxerwood is a non-profit organization that survives by membership support, donations, grants, and program fees, explained Bytnar. “Contrary to what many people think, we do not have a hefty endowment,” he said, noting the organization still needs to raise an additional \$60,000 this fiscal year to meet its overall operational budget of \$290,000. “In a nutshell, our success is outpacing our funding,” he said. Although not raising those funds could result in diminished services, Bytnar is cautiously optimistic. “Recently, 34 local citizens contributed \$12,000 to help us establish a scholarship fund for local schools unable to fully pay for their Boxerwood programs,” he said. “Those funds help schools and help Boxerwood and we really appreciate this kind of donor leadership.” Bytnar said he hopes Boxerwood achievements this fall will encourage more local investors to step forward, thus strengthening its service to the Rockbridge area as one of Virginia’s Center for Environmental Education Excellence.

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