

Save the Earth, Tend the Children ~

A Visit with Naturalist Jeannine Palms, Owner of Blossom Home Pre-School & Adventures



Jeannine Palms

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By Rachel Urist

I arrive at Jeannine Palms’s home on a Tuesday morning to find her outside, pushing a wheelbarrow. Two pre-schoolers trail behind her. Two others rush to greet me. “Are you from Crazy Wisdom?” one asks. Jeannine looks up and greets me by name. The children echo the greeting. I am pleasantly surprised. I hadn’t expected such greetings.

This is Blossom Home Pre-School & Adventures, now 25 years old. Once the children move on from pre-school, they can enroll in one of Jeannine’s after-school “Blossom Adventure” sessions, and the friendships forged at Blossom continue. Older kids, 6–10 years old, come two days a week, from 4:00–5:30 pm.

Adventures take place in or around the home, with many activities in the 39-acre expanse of Buhr Park, which is an extension of Jeannine’s back yard. Jeannine and the children can walk to the park’s Cobblestone Farm, the newly initiated Food Forest, any of the three Children’s Wet Meadow Project meadows, the sledding hill, climbing trees fondly known as the Porcupine Trees, or Ice Mountain, the piles of icy scrapings from the ice rink.

All these sites are visible from Jeannine’s back yard, whose most salient feature is a sturdy, rustic, wide swing. It seats five children. Jeannine’s friend, an urban forester, made the swing, and it hangs from a climbing tree, which also holds a knotted rope for scaling. When Jeannine pushes the pre-school children on the swing, it begins to twirl. I joke with the kids that it’s dizzying. “Dizzy is good,” Jeannine says. “It stimulates the brain. That’s true in children, till about age ten.”

Later in the day, when a Blossom Adventure child follows her friend up the tree but can’t get down, Jeannine calmly shows her another way. “Try turning, so you’re facing the tree.” The child tries several times to turn. She finally succeeds. “Good! Now, hold the rope, and find your footing. It’s an easy drop to the ground. I’ll spot you.” The child descends without a hitch.

“Do you have your diggers?” Jeannine asks the pre-school children. I wonder what “diggers” are. Then I see. From a bucket, each child selects a weeding tool and holds it, pointed side down, as they’ve been taught. The children are off to Ian’s house, three doors down, where they will need diggers to remove weeds from Ian’s garden.

As we head for Ian’s, I ask Jeannine about the profusion of plants in her garden. “That’s trillium, wild geranium, celadine poppy, scouring rush — a form of horsetail,



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mayapple, and sorel.” There are almost 100 different plant species in the garden: ferns, native perennials, herbs, peonies, strawberries, vegetables, phlox, flowering trees, and fruit trees.

The list is long and the time short; children’s questions come first. They ask about the neighbors’ plants en route to Ian’s back yard, where a 4 x 6-foot garden plot awaits. Ian’s yard, like Jeannine’s, adjoins the park. The garden plot is covered with hay, to which Jeannine will add the wheelbarrow’s stash of “nice rotting hay,” a good mulch.

Jeannine is 65 and slim, with ash blond hair that falls below her shoulders. If she has grey hair, it is well camouflaged. Hairclips behind each ear create a pig-tails look. She wears a floppy-brimmed gardening hat and, like the children, she is in rain boots, rain pants, and a hooded jacket. Her hat is courtesy of the City of Ann Arbor’s Natural Area Preservation Commission. She is an official steward for Buhr Park.

Ian smiles broadly when the kids arrive. He knows these kids, and the older ones, too. A certified special education teacher, he subs frequently at Allen School. The kids dig in, weeding unwanted greens. I am surprised to learn that lily of the valley is an invasive species that crowds out the native ones.

The adults take turns with Ian’s spade, digging to create an “edge” to help prevent invading weeds. “Look! There’s a big earthworm,” shouts one of the kids. “There are lots of them! And look at all the roly polys! There’s a big spider!” Everyone stops to examine the creatures.

A child proudly pulls up a big dandelion plant, roots attached, and Jeannine points out that the hole that’s left is a good place for rainwater to seep, to help other plants grow. Then Ian shows Jeannine a vine creeping along the garden plot. “Can I just pull it out?” he asks her. Jeannine looks. “This is creeping Charlie. Yes, let’s pull it.” Ian tells me that this garden will have basil, tomatoes, peppers, and calendula. The kids, tired of weeding, have begun to run up and down the grassy hill of Ian’s back yard. While they play, Jeannine explains that calendula is a flower that attracts bees and other pollinators. It is edible and medicinal.

Later she explains that the “edge” they created by digging a narrow trench around the garden plot eliminates the need to weed much in the future. Leaving soil undisturbed, allowing organisms to develop and weed seeds to germinate, prevents the release of carbon to the atmosphere. Where soil is exposed, carbon is released. The kids are thirsty and hungry. Jeannine has them all wash up – outside. Since there is no hose handy, a water bottle, stashed in her purple backpack, becomes a faucet. Jeannine squirts frugally. They wash over a sapling, so that the tree benefits from the water, too. “I have all this nice loam in my fingernails. Do you have some, too?” she asks the kids as they wash.

When a child has trouble with a task, she suggests that the other children help. In this way, the children own their activities at school. They are not corralled or regimented; they are making things happen.

At home, too, she washes in water-saving ways. When she cleans her dishes, she sets two small bins of water side by side. One is soapy, one clear; no need for running water. Recently, she had an energy-efficient, metal roof installed on her house. It reflects heat away from the rooms beneath, keeping it surprisingly cool on hot days. Her transportation, too, puts the environment first. Jeannine walks or bikes whenever possible. Where distance requires a motor, she takes the bus.

Jeannine and the children sit on the grass for their snack: water and homemade whole-wheat crackers. I say to Jeannine: “You probably don’t own a pair of gardening gloves.” “Oh, I have some in my pocket,” she says. “But soil has endorphins, so some people avoid gloves. The endorphins are why some people like gardening so much.”

Jeannine Palms’s Favorite Initiatives

- **350** is the global, grassroots movement to reduce the level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Scientists are convinced that the safe upper limit for carbon dioxide is 350 parts per million (PPM) in our atmosphere. Right now we’re at 390 PPM. Jeannine, like many of the scientists studying climate change, is hopeful that we can save the planet—IF we get back down to 350. New treaties and policy changes are needed to ensure this correction. Go to 350.org to learn more—and to see some wonderful photo albums.
- **10/10/10**, a global work party, was a project of 350.org. **It was a day of practical, positive action.** Thousands of events, big and small, took place on that day around the world. Each event was designed to reduce carbon emissions. **Says Jeannine:** “It truly was ‘A Day to Celebrate Climate Solutions’; together we got to work in our communities on projects that can cut carbon and build the clean energy future.” The name, 10/10/10, is a nod to its launch date: October 10, 2010. 171 participating countries are now on 10/10/10’s roster. Ian’s garden was sown that day as a 10/10/10 project. (Visit www.350.org/en/node/16834 to learn more.)
- **The Buhr Park Children’s Wet Meadow Project** created and supports a group of wet meadow ecosystems in Ann Arbor’s Buhr Park. The wet meadows provide a habitat for native plants and animals, an attractive educational site for children, neighbors, and other visitors, and an environmental filter for storm water runoff from the park grounds. The original Children’s Wet Meadow is behind Cobblestone Farm. The second, a three-basin meadow, is on the west side, uphill from the playground. There are frequent events at the wet meadows, including an annual prescribed burn and presentations by naturalists who teach the children about the value of wetlands. Programs have focused on insects, pollinators, and wildflowers. See www.wetmeadow.org.
- **The Food Forest**, in Buhr Park, is a stone’s throw from Allen School. The idea was born several years ago, part of an effort to help create local food security. Jeannine, along with friends and neighbors, continue to meet, plan, and create this garden, which is an extension of the third wet meadow. Last spring, the Allen School Pride Team wrote and received a grant to fund some of the fruit trees for the project. Under Jeannine’s guidance, the team of students, parents and teachers, neighbors, and friends have planted 15 fruit trees. The garden will yield apples, pears, peaches, cherries, plums, apricots, chestnuts, and pawpaws.
- **Natural Area Preservation (NAP)** is a commission mandated to protect and restore Ann Arbor’s natural areas, and to foster an environmental ethic in the community. NAP staff and volunteers conduct a wide range of ecological stewardship activities to restore the native plant and animal communities throughout the Ann Arbor Parks system’s 1200 acres of natural areas.
- **The Resilience Circle** is part of a nationwide movement of small groups, usually 10–20 people in each, who help one another through challenging times. Jeannine’s Resilience Circle is neighborhood based. Help spans a wide continuum, from sharing yard equipment, to sewing, cooking, consulting, providing employment counseling, financial assistance, and child care or pet-sitting. Each group has a facilitator, who helps the group learn about the causes of the economic downswing, the threats of climate change, and then to identify and address local needs.

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Jeannine has been teaching for 40 years, first in Detroit, now at her Ann Arbor home. She and her partner, Dale Petty, moved from Detroit 22 years ago. She was raised in Oakland County, before it became so suburban. Her family had 100 acres, and a grandmother lived down the lane. The homestead provided space for growing vegetables organically and raising chickens. They had a horse, too.

Jeannine, along with her eight younger siblings and sundry cousins, learned to husband the earth long before "environmentalism" was coined. Jeannine's mother would take the children on nature walks, through fields and wetlands. Family vacations were rustic: camping in parks and wilderness areas throughout Michigan every summer. Her parents were avid conservationists.

Care for each other and the earth is the central focus of Jeannine's Blossom Home activities. The children can already distinguish certain native from non-native plant species, and they can name many. Some of the children have helped Jeannine and others plant fruit trees in the newly forming Food Forest, a project that she helps coordinate with other community members, including students from Allen Elementary.

Jeannine asks for the disputed ribbon. ("May I hold this while we solve the problem?") The child hands it over. "You wanted it so much, you forgot to think; you forgot to listen," Jeannine says. "Horses are like people; they like to be treated gently."

Along with the Blossom pre-schoolers, she was also an initiator of the Buhr Park Children's Wet Meadow project. When the first wet meadow was extended, Yousef Rabhi, a Blossom Home alumnus and now a county commissioner, served as project manager.

Back at Blossom, as the kids fondly call their pre-school, the kids remove their outerwear and stow everything in designated areas: hooks, cubbies, and floor space. They launch themselves into activity while Jeannine starts lunch, made of locally, organically grown grains, beans, lentils, tofu, fruits, and vegetables.

One child takes out crayons and paper and begins to color. Another, whose raingear hid a frilly pink "princess dress," as she calls it, begins to dance. The other two climb onto sawhorse-type structures with dowel-rungs on the sides for climbing and a cardboard horse-head with a mane of yarn affixed to the front end. The kids race across the prairie, which is what the playroom has become.

Suddenly, a child shouts: "Everybody be quiet! The baby is waking up!" He refers to a doll that he has just covered with a blanket. The dancer, still twirling, proclaims: "I am doing a performance!" The two equestrians, who have been waving a single ribbon, begin to tussle. Jeannine, who has monitored everything from the kitchen, emerges, observes, and calmly asks: "Can you solve this yourselves?" They try. The dispute deepens.

"Would you like help solving this?" she asks. A child becomes teary. Jeannine asks for the disputed ribbon. ("May I hold this while we solve the problem?") The child hands it over. "You wanted it so much, you forgot to think; you forgot to listen," Jeannine says. "Horses are like people; they like to be treated gently." She lets this sink in. Then: "Let's start over. May I give you a suggestion? How about I set the timer, and each of you gets to have the ribbon for the same amount of time?" This feels just. The problem is solved.

This is one of many examples of how Jeannine promotes self-sufficiency and compassion. When a child cries, Jeannine calls attention to the tears, as if to drive home the consequences of inattention — or, worse, aggression. When a child has trouble with a task, she suggests that the other children help. In this way, the children own their activities at school. They are not corralled or regimented; they are making things happen.

Jeannine is a no-nonsense person, but she is not brusque. She simply has no time to waste. Her calendar is full. Her mission is two-pronged: save the earth, tend the children. She would probably laugh at that grandiose tenor, but she is deeply committed to both pedagogy and the environment. Her philosophy of teaching may best be summed up as: provide the stimuli for learning; use nature to excite imagination; and teach them to be caring, curious, and involved members of the community.

In Jeannine's cheerfully filled living room, which serves as an indoor play-space, a table holds jars of grain, seeds, and corn, which are used — as the children tell me — for making biscuits, bread, and cornbread. They grind the grains themselves. Recycling is a given. When Jeannine cuts apple sections for the children's snacks, they are aware that the parings she saves will become compost. Any bag she uses will be re-used.

In doing projects with children, Jeannine instructs them in age-appropriate ways. No one is patronized, indulged, or commandeered. Children are gently encouraged. Invariably, they see the value of cooperation. The message is clear: Be considerate to each other and to the planet.

I visit the school a few times. During my visits, she mentions several initiatives: 350, 10/10/10, the Food Forest, the Buhr Park Children's Wet Meadow Project, Natural Area Preservation (NAP), and the Resilience Circle. Jeannine is deeply involved with all of them. No profile of Jeannine Palms would be complete without describing these initiatives; they are elemental to her being. (See the sidebar for a primer.)

Because of Jeannine's consistent and determined efforts to teach and promote sustainability, the Ecology Center of Ann Arbor honored her on November 11, 2009 with the Herbert Munzel Award for Environmental Activism. The venerable Bill McKibben, professor at Middlebury College, author of a dozen books about the environment, and founder of 350.org, was on hand to give a speech on global warming. His 1989 book, *The End of Nature*, is regarded as the first book for a general audience on climate change.

Jeannine's ethic, to think globally and act locally, is shared by her partner, Dale Petty, an instructor at Washtenaw Community College. He often joins her on environmental projects. Several times a year, they travel up north to the Jinny Palms Wildlife Preserve just a mile inland from Lake Superior. In 2001, Jeannine bought 360 acres of land — intact and wild — on the southern shore of Lake Superior and donated it to the Little Traverse Conservancy. The wildlife preserve is named for Jeannine's mother.

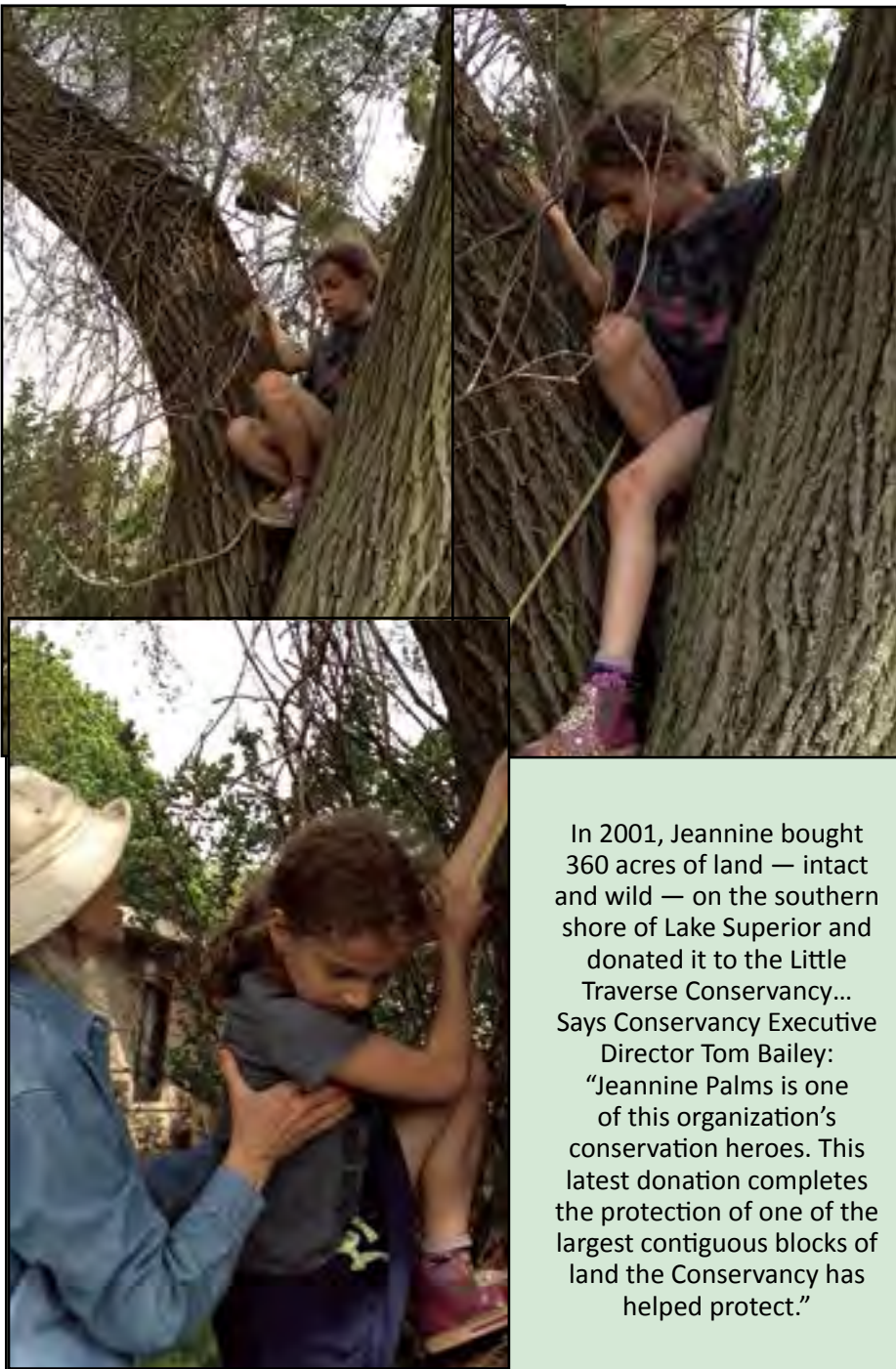


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Says Conservancy Executive Director Tom Bailey: "Jeannine Palms is one of this organization's conservation heroes. This latest donation completes the protection of one of the largest contiguous blocks of land the Conservancy has helped protect." She and Dale are the stewards for this preserve, as well as for the Lake Superior Nature Sanctuary, a Michigan Nature Association preserve located between the Jinny Palms Preserve and Lake Superior.

Jeannine Palms is an unimposing figure who leaves a profound imprint. Scores of her former students, whom she calls "my kids," are now making their way in the world. Mothers and fathers of her current kids drop in to say hi, to help, to hug one or all of the children. They are drawn to Jeannine's warmth and to her calm, inspiring competence and infectious self-confidence.



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At a recent Reskilling Festival, Jeannine met a former nanny, Tara Habeck [HAY-beck], who was looking for a new direction. Jeannine asked Tara whether she had considered opening a home pre-school. The idea had not occurred to Tara, who was looking for a new house. “There’s one for rent next door to me,” Jeannine said. Tara is now Jeannine’s neighbor, and a “Blossom Floricita” (Little Blossom) will begin sessions this fall. There is already a summer camp program under way. Jeannine gave her waiting list to Tara, and the women now work as partners.

Jeannine’s discussions with parents of pre-schoolers often involve books on parenting and child development. Jeannine’s latest recommendation is: *Radical Homemakers: Reclaiming Domesticity from a Consumer Culture* by Shannon Hayes. Jeannine and a parent, who stays after the other children have left, enthuse together about the book, whose theme reflects Jeannine’s and Blossom Home’s ethics. Here is a synopsis:


Radical Homemakers is about men and women across the U.S. who focus on home and hearth as a political and ecological act, and who have centered their lives around family and community for personal fulfillment and cultural change. Faced with climate change, dwindling resources, and species extinctions, it is widely understood that we must drive less, consume less, increase self-reliance, buy locally, eat locally, rebuild our local communities. In essence, the great work we face requires rekindling the home fires. The book explores what domesticity looks like in an era that has benefited from feminism, where domination and oppression are cast aside and where the choice to stay home is no longer equated with mind-numbing drudgery, economic insecurity, or relentless servitude. *Radical Homemakers* nationwide speak about empowerment, transformation, happiness, and casting aside the pressures of a consumer culture.

Jeannine Palms and Blossom Home Pre-School & Adventures are located at 2656 Easy Street, Ann Arbor, 48104. She may be reached at (734) 971-5870 or Jeannine@wetmeadow.org. Her website is: blossomhomea2.com.



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