

Steep Rock Association is a land trust whose mission is to conserve ecologically and historically significant landscapes in and around Washington, CT and the Shepaug River Valley and to enhance the community's connection with nature.

In pursuing its mission, Steep Rock Association will:

- Use best management practices to maintain and manage the lands and improvements entrusted to it for passive recreation, the protection of native flora and fauna, and to support sustainable agriculture.
- Strive to raise environmental consciousness by enhancing the community's knowledge and appreciation of nature and its awareness of Steep Rock's on-going contributions to the culture and history of the Town of Washington.
- Pursue land-based non-commercial activities that benefit both Steep Rock and the community.

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National Recognition Earned Strong Commitment to Public Trust and Conservation Excellence



Macricostas Preserve Boardwalk meadow

Across the nation, Americans strongly support saving the open spaces they love. Since 1925, Steep Rock Association (SRA) has been doing just that for the people and visitors of the town of Washington. This year, through a multi-year process, SRA earned national recognition. The Land Trust Accreditation Commission, an independent project of the Land Trust Alliance (LTA), recognized SRA in the spring of 2016 as an accredited land trust. Proudly joining a network of only 372 accredited land trusts in the United States, SRA has demonstrated its commitment to professional excellence and to maintaining the public's trust in their work.

“We are beyond pleased to have earned this national recognition. Accreditation shows our visitors, supporters, and partners that Steep Rock Association is committed to ensuring our conserved lands are protected forever,” said Lori Paradis Brant, Executive Director. “By proving we met the rigorous practices of accreditation, we have strengthened our own processes and further guaranteed our special places such as Steep Rock, Hidden Valley, and Macricostas Preserves will be there for generations to explore.”

Steep Rock Association had to provide extensive documentation and undergo a comprehensive review as part of its accreditation application. The Land Trust Accreditation Commission awarded accreditation, signifying its confidence that SRA's lands will be protected forever. Nationally, almost 20 million acres of farms, forests and natural areas vital to healthy communities are now permanently conserved by an accredited land trust.

This is in line with the forethought exhibited by Ehrick Rossiter, who founded the Association in 1925 by donating 100 acres of forested land, now called Steep Rock Preserve and over 950 acres, which he had purchased in order to save it from logging. At that time, there were little to no management plans for forestry work, so forests were clear cut



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Lori Paradis Brant, editor

OFFICE CONTACT INFORMATION

Steep Rock Association
2 Green Hill Road, P.O. Box 279
Washington Depot, CT 06794
Tel: (860) 868-9131
info@steeprockassoc.org
www.steeprockassoc.org

IN THE ARENA*

A Generous Spirit *By Natalie Dyer*

Estelle Bronson, who passed away April 21, 2017, left the world a better place. She was a selfless and kind person, always there for one in need. She also loved the natural world which led to her decision in 2011 to preserve rather than develop nearly 70 acres of her farm that had been in her family since the 1930's. The property, now called Bronson Fields, was purchased by Steep Rock Association with contributions from many generous donors and a grant from the State of Connecticut. Being conservation-minded, Estelle was aware not only of the beauty of the property, but of the environmental importance of the riparian corridor, the critical habitats, the unfragmented forest, and the important wetlands. She also appreciated the fact that the farm fields would continue to be planted, carrying on the town's farming tradition as well as enhancing its rural character. Although her declining health prevented her from walking this newest section of Hidden Valley Preserve, she delighted in the knowledge that staff members Clark Gifford and Rory Larson had laid out a beautiful trail. This trail skirts the agricultural fields, meanders back through the woods, and reaches



Estelle Bronson

Contributed Photo

the northern boundary of Hidden Valley by way of a 600 foot boardwalk over the pristine wetlands. It is evident to anyone who knew her, that her generous spirit is evident in the Bronson Fields. ■

*This column's title is a nod to the 1910 *Citizenship in a Republic* speech given by then former President Teddy Roosevelt at the Sorbonne in Paris. The speech accentuated the importance of people – their character and their efforts – to make a republic succeed.



Corn planted at Bronson Fields

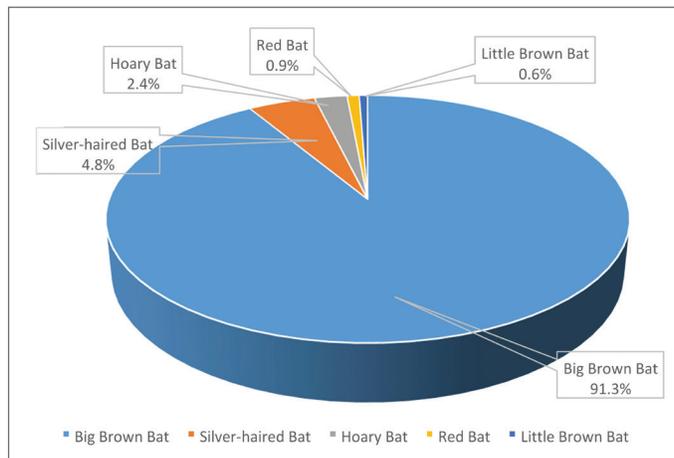
Photo by SRA

Notes from the Field

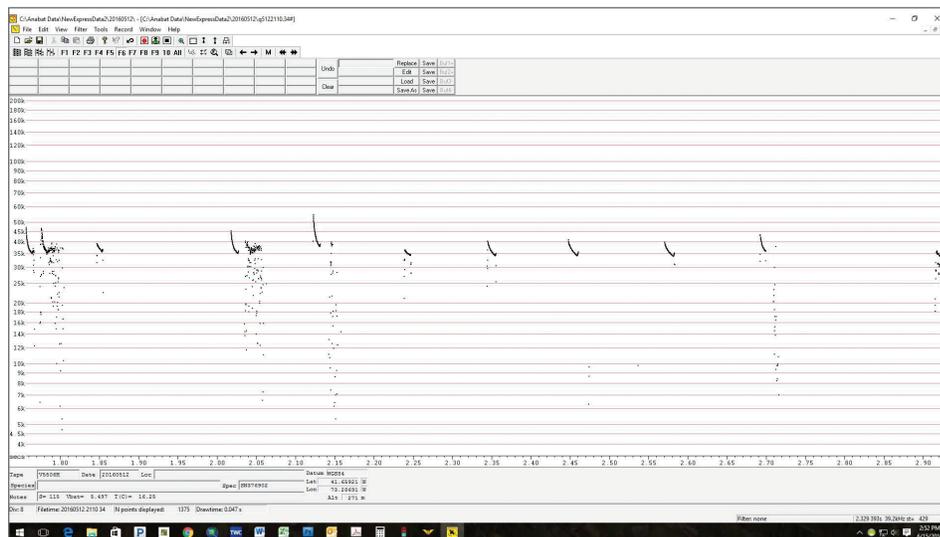
By Rory Larson

Bats not only flap webbed digits to get around, they also use echolocation to navigate through their surroundings and capture insects, rapidly emitting high-frequency pulses of sound and interpreting the echo produced when they bounce off nearby objects. This behavior allows for non-invasive sampling through a method known as acoustic monitoring. Detectors housing a microphone are deployed overnight to record “calls”, most of which occur at frequencies too high to be heard by the human ear and often vary enough between species to allow for identification. Steep Rock Association (SRA) did just this through the summer of 2016.

Within our strategic plan, a primary stewardship initiative is to survey, understand, and manage our properties to protect and enhance biodiversity. By acoustically monitoring bats, we improve our knowledge of what species inhabit the preserves, their relative abundance, and habitat preferences. We can incorporate this insight into our management plan to provide resources for those in greatest need of conservation. Populations throughout the northeast have declined, most notably being the abrupt collapse of cave-roosting bats following the introduction of white-nose syndrome (WNS) to New York in 2008. WNS results from an infection by the cold-loving, cave-dwelling fungus *Pseudogymonascus destructans*, which causes bats to cluster near hibernacula entrances, wake up from torpor, and even fly outside during winter. These activities result in a premature expenditure of fat reserves, and in just four years since its detection, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimated that six million bats had perished in the northeast. Those affected by WNS include the big brown, little brown, eastern small-footed, northern long-eared, tri-colored, and Indiana bats. Connecticut’s tree-roosting species (silver-haired, hoary,



2016 DEEP Acoustic Monitoring Species Composition of Steep Rock Association Properties



Sonogram of Eastern Red Bat at Logan Preserve

and eastern red) migrate rather than overwinter and thus are not affected by WNS; however, they too have experienced regional declines, although much more gradually.

Nine sites in six of our preserves were sampled by SRA staff. In conjunction, Connecticut Department of Energy & Environmental Protection (DEEP) monitored four additional sites as part of their statewide effort. Acoustic analysis identified five species occurring on SRA lands. The big brown and silver-haired bats were the dominant species detected. Hoary and eastern red bats were well represented across the Washington landscape and seemed to prefer

foraging early (shortly after sunset) and late (shortly before sunrise). Lastly, the little brown bat, once one of the most abundant species in the state, was found in low numbers at half of the sites.

This summer of 2017, SRA aims to document endangered bats by surveying habitat types less represented in 2016’s efforts, which include open water, old-growth forest, and talus/ledge slopes. Please join our mission to conserve bats who play a vital ecosystem role by keeping insect populations in check. You can protect prime foraging habitat like watercourse corridors and leave snags (standing dead trees) available for summer roosting and pup rearing. ■

Donor Spotlight: Eliot Johnson



Photo: Stephanie Johnson

Eliot Johnson is a part-time farmer and the owner of West Mountain Builders, a general contracting company specializing in renovations and custom-built homes. Eliot lives, farms, and does business at 30 West Mountain Road, on property that once housed his grandfather's dairy farm – which began in 1941. The Johnsons have been active, respected members of the community for 75 years. That spirit of service and longevity endures through Eliot's contribution to the boards of the Washington Art Association and the Steep Rock Association (SRA) as well as the fourth generation of Johnsons (Eliot's three sons) growing up in Washington. Recently, we had a chance to hear from Eliot on why he supports the work of the Association.

SRA: Why did you first get involved with SRA?

Eliot: My family has lived in Washington since 1941. My paternal grandfather was on the Steep Rock board and my maternal grandmother loved to walk to the tunnel on a weekly basis. So, in some

ways, Steep Rock has been a presence in my life from the beginning. However, several years ago, my cousin John Potter nominated me for the Steep Rock board and I jumped at the chance to become more involved. I have always been very interested in conservation, especially agricultural preservation.

SRA: What do you wish other people knew about local conservation efforts?

Eliot: Sometimes I think people are unaware that Steep Rock is not a public park, but a privately funded enterprise. I wish more people knew that there are volunteer opportunities at Steep Rock and many ways to contribute to its preservation.

SRA: What can you share about other people you've met while supporting our cause to protect the land and river while connecting the community to nature?

Eliot: Steep Rock's mission – namely to protect and preserve the natural spaces of Washington - has a way of unifying the sometimes divergent elements of our community toward a common cause. I have found that the people involved in Steep Rock, while often from different backgrounds, have in common a strong love of nature and a passion for preserving this unique community.

SRA: What would you say are some of your strongest beliefs about conservation?

Eliot: Growing up, I had a very close relationship with my grandfather Lathrop Johnson who was a dairy farmer in

Washington in the 1940s-70s. Consequently, while I make my living as a general contractor, farming is very close to my heart. I believe in honoring Washington's agrarian history by keeping some land under conservation easement specifically for farming purposes. Farmers need these eased lands to create affordable models to do their work and we need them in our community to maintain our rural roots.

SRA: What is your favorite place in Steep Rock Association's preserves?

Eliot: I love the accessibility of Hidden Valley's bridge to bridge walk, which is a beautiful trail and easy enough for all ages to walk. However, my real favorite is a small patch of land at the end of our road called West Mountain Preserve. It is a steeply wooded hillside with a quiet stream at the bottom that my brothers and I spent many hours traversing in our younger years. Recently I had to haul my three young boys out of the same woods after they rode their bikes down to the bottom and couldn't quite make it back up on their own.

SRA: Why do you chose to donate to SRA?

Eliot: As parents to young children, local business owners, and Washington residents, my wife Stephanie and I strongly believe that giving to Steep Rock is an investment in all of our future. Steep Rock and its mission of preservation, makes Washington a unique and beautiful place. Maintaining that benefits my children, my business and my town; we feel privileged to contribute. ■

Volunteer Spotlight: Nest Watchers *By Rory Larson*

If you have hiked in Macricostas Preserve, traversing the boardwalk through a refreshed fen (a type of wetland), chances are you have noticed the trail of nest boxes or ducked to avoid one of its avian tenants. Populations of cavity nesting birds like tree swallow and eastern bluebird have rebounded with increased availability of these artificial nest sites. Boxes are cleaned out every February before the onset of breeding, but this year, with the help of nine citi-

zen scientists, Steep Rock Association (SRA) has stepped up its stewardship.

Our conservation-minded volunteers trained in proper nest box management are currently putting this knowledge to practice. Their efforts encompass our participation in NestWatch, a nationwide monitoring program run by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, which is designed to track the status and trends in the reproductive biology of birds.

As of May 1st, SRA NestWatchers performed 102 nest checks, documenting 9 complete and 3 incomplete tree swallow and eastern bluebird nests as well as 7 eastern bluebird eggs. Their interest and commitment has resulted in a tremendous start to the project, which will ultimately provide themselves, Steep Rock Association, and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology with valu-

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FARM LIFE

Agronomy through the Ages

By Stephanie Maynard

Although documentation is difficult to attain, stories detailing the agricultural history in the “hollow” is common folklore. This area between Washington, Roxbury, and New Milford has set the landscape for these towns’ histories with the distinctive agronomy that has been based within such land. The land area between Walker Brook Road and Shinar Mountain Road is not well known to the commuter, as the roads themselves were little more than horse paths moving into the 20th century. Since the Fall of 1997 Mark Maynard has operated Ox Hollow Farm* out of this historical farm, and the past 20 years have been dedicated towards the salvation of this historic farmland. Rumors from previous farmhands report that in the early 1900’s this property was primarily a potato farm. During the 1940’s when it changed hands to an acclaimed dairy farm, archaic potato machinery could be found on the stone walls dividing the pastures. In the mid to late 1900’s, little preservation was done to this property, leaving the barbed wire fence in shambles and both the pasture and hay land overgrown with invasive Russian olive and thorn bush. With help



Cows and calves at pasture

from Steep Rock Association and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, the pastures were re-fenced with high tensile electric fence, and the streams were partitioned off so that animals would not contaminate Walker Brook, the waterway that passes through this area and is a tributary to the Shepaug River. Throughout the winter of 2015-2016, the stone walls that once separated pastures were updated to an internal high tensile electric fence infrastructure, allowing animals to sufficiently be rotationally grazed. After decades of overgrowth, brush-hogging, fertilizing, re-seeding, and rotationally grazing the pastures, the land between the two roads is more lush than ever,

hosting over 30 mother cows and their calves every summer. Along with various species sharing this land there is also a family of kestrels that claim Shinar Mountain Pasture as their home [editor’s note: see VISTA Winter 2016-2017 for photos of the kestrel chicks being banded for scientific purposes]. In June, the animals will be returning to their summer pasture, and with newly graded roads, and our feathered friends returning, visitors are welcome to admire this lush land and its rich history. ■

**To support local, sustainable agriculture, SRA leases its Carter Preserve as working farmland to Ox Hollow Farm.*

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Photo: Lisa Roush

Our youngest citizen scientist, Kate Roush, poses with one of her assigned nest boxes.

able insight on bird occupancy, preference, and reproductive success of breeding birds utilizing nest boxes in western Connecticut.

When asked about involvement in the project, Tom Tibbatts shared “In my eighty years, I’ve volunteered for a number and variety of programs that dealt with people. But, Nest Watch is my first experience involving a creature of nature, and I’m finding it to be rewarding and fun as it keeps me close to nature and specifically birds, which bring me much joy.”

Joan Temple replied, “Being a part of NestWatch helps me to feel connected to the natural world in a time of tech overload. Going out to the Macricostas Preserve and witnessing the bluebirds building their nests restores my faith that Mother Nature has a master plan, and we are all part of it.”

Our organization *and* feathered friends would like to give a huge thanks to our NestWatchers — Tom Gaynor, Lisa Breese, Enya Cunningham, Alexis Barbalinardo, Joan and Mike Temple, Lisa and Kate Roush, and Tom Tibbatts.

NEWS & NOTICES

➤ Meet Kelly – SRA's newest staff member



Kelly Anderson

Kelly Anderson joined Steep Rock Association late in 2016 as our Office Manager and has been working to keep the SRA office running smoothly. She assists with development and donation management, communications and various administrative tasks. Kelly warmly encourages visitors to stop by the (dog friendly) office to sign up for the Hikers Challenge, purchase a trail map, or to ask questions about the preserves.

Kelly has her Bachelor of Business Administration in Marketing from Western Connecticut State University and comes most recently from Wesleyan University's Center for the Arts and Davis Raines Design. She enjoys seeing live music, doing yoga and hiking with her black lab Buddy. Please join us in welcoming her – Kelly.Anderson@steeprockassoc.org

➤ Preserving Farmland

In our pursuit to support sustainable agriculture, we are hoping to acquire a 50+ acre parcel of farmland on West Mountain Road in town. Recently, our dedicated team submitted two separate and complex grant applications to help with this potential acquisition. One application is via the U.S. Department of Agriculture which would restrict much of the land to agricultural purposes. The other grant application was

through the Connecticut Department of Energy & Environmental Protection, which helps purchase open space lands for the benefit of the public. Our goal is both to preserve the farmland and also to create a relatively flat walking trail around the hayfield. Ultimately, we hope to connect that new trail with our West Mountain Preserve. We expect to learn some time in the fall if we will be awarded the grants.

➤ Judea Garden Produce Distribution

- Washington – Mondays, Washington Town Hall 11:45 a.m. – 5:15 p.m.
- NEW! Warren - 1st and 3rd Tuesdays, Warren Community Center, 10:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.
- New Milford – Thursdays, Social Services offices, 9:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.

Please visit our website for beginning dates and information regarding eligibility.

➤ 3 Peaks Challenge

Enjoy hiking with a view? Take our 3 Peaks Challenge. Ascend all three peaks in our public preserves: Hidden Valley's Pinnacle, Macricostas' Waramaug Rock, and the Steep Rock Summit, and take a selfie to post on our Facebook page. Visit our website to complete the form, send in your participation fee, and receive our new SRA Preserves organic t-shirt. www.steeprockassoc.org/3-peaks-challenge/



Peas

➤ Take a Story Walk

We're enjoying our storytime and family workshop partnership with the Gunn Memorial Junior Library and are thrilled to team up again with them at Macricostas Preserve this summer. As



Photo: Linda Morse, Gunn Memorial Jr Library

Rory Larson leads a Family Weekend Workshop

part of the Junior Library's summer reading theme, *Build a Better World*, families with young children are welcome to follow the Story Walk posted on the grounds of our historic home at Macricostas Preserve (the red house at the entrance). Updates will be posted on our website as well as the library's site.

VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

There are many opportunities for you to help; please contact our Volunteer Coordinator, Denise.Arturi@steeprockassoc.org.

➤ Keepers of the Kiosks

Do you have a sense of order and maybe a little creativity as well? Our informational kiosks, located in our three preserves, are an important communication tool.

- **Duties:** Keep SRA kiosks current by posting/removing flyers and notices; pick up flyers from SRA office
- **Skills:** Must be able to lift kiosk front; Ability to access kiosks
- **Commitment:** 1-2 hours a month

➤ Preserve Visitor Surveys

Help us get an understanding of how our preserves are used through a quarterly survey given to our visitors in each of our preserves.

- **Duties:** 2 hour shift at one of the preserves handing out surveys and answering questions.
- **Skills:** Positive interaction with others
- **Commitment:** 2 hours

➤ Citizen Science

Do you enjoy observing nature? Will you help us collect data for science? Training is on us. Collect info on frogs, birds, plants, insects and more. Conservation science needs you now more than ever.

Seasonal opportunities are available.

➤ Trail Monitors

With 40 miles of trails located in three preserves, Volunteer Trail Monitors are SRA's eyes on the ground. Monitors will report trail conditions and make small repairs if necessary.

➤ Judea Garden

With your help, we've grown, harvested, and distributed over 30,000 lbs. of fresh produce to members of our community who have limited financial resources.

🌿 GARDEN HELPER

Duties: Plant, water, weed, harvest

Skills: A willingness to help.

Commitment: Whatever your schedule allows; 15 minutes - 3 hours, weekly or seasonally



Cutting trail at Bronson Field in Hidden Valley Preserve

Contributed Photo



Volunteers working in the garden

🌿 ADOPT A CROP

Duties: Be responsible for a row(s) of vegetables including planting and tending. (Good to do with a friend or a group of friends!)

Skills: Some gardening knowledge helpful

Commitment: approximately 30 - 60 minutes/week

🌿 PRODUCE DISTRIBUTION

Duties: Help with distribution. Set up/ Clean up in Washington Town Hall; Drive produce to New Milford or Warren.

Skills: Ability to lift and carry containers when taking to other location; Need to drive

Commitment: 30 - 60 minutes/week

🌿 RECIPE TESTER

Duties: Find/create and test recipes using types of vegetables found in Judea Garden to encourage recipients to use the produce. Recipes will be posted online and distributed with harvest.

Skills: Good cooking chops

Commitment: Per individual

🌿 WEED & WINE IN THE GARDEN

Wednesdays, June 14 to August 16, 5:30 - 7:00 pm

Duties: Weed, have fun

Skills: Hand weed or use tools (will train)

Commitment: 30 - 90 minutes/week

Continued from page 1

without selection, limitation, or re-planting. Steep Rock was given to individually named Trustees so that they may secure "...its preservation, improvement and maintenance for the use and enjoyment of citizens and residents of Washington and Litchfield County and of their guests and friends and of the general public."

"It is exciting to recognize Steep Rock Association with this distinction," said Tammara Van Ryn, executive director of the Commission. "Accredited land trusts are united behind strong ethical standards ensuring the places people love will be conserved forever. Accreditation recognizes Steep Rock Association has demonstrated sound finances, ethical conduct, responsible governance, and lasting stewardship."

SRA is one of 1,363 land trusts across the United States according to the most recent National Land Trust Census, released December 1, 2016 by the Land Trust Alliance. This comprehensive report also shows that accredited land trusts have made significant achievements:

- Accredited land trusts protected five times more land from 2010 to 2015 than land trusts that were not yet accredited.
- Accredited land trusts also have stronger systems and more resources to steward and defend their conservation lands forever.
- As a result, the public's trust in land conservation has increased helping to win support for federal, state and local conservation funding measures.

President of SRA's Board of Trustees, Gene Pinover, shared, "LTA accreditation process has helped Steep Rock Association enormously in focusing on the highest standard of operation and accountability. Accreditation will be a guide to help us make better informed decisions to protect our lands and their biodiversity." In addition, "becoming accredited is another milestone in accomplishing the goals outlined in our Strategic Plan 2020," noted Kirsten Feldman, Chair of the SRA Board of Trustees. ■

From THE GARDEN *By Denise Arturi*

Liam Shannon is a young man who knows how to get things done. A Boy Scout can begin his Eagle Project once he has 21 merit badges and has until he is 18 years of age to complete it. At age 14, Liam said, “Why wait,” and began the process of creating his service project via email and Skype while studying abroad in Germany. Luckily for us, Liam chose Judea Garden and SRA as the organization he wished to help.

Liam came as a young child with his parents, Holly and Bill Shannon, to volunteer at Judea Garden and so he was familiar with the Garden and its mission. Liam reviewed various project possibilities, weighing the requirements of the Eagle Project, his resources, and the needs of Judea Garden. He decided to build two Leopold benches and washing tables for harvesting. There already were plans for the Leopold bench, although Liam did improvise and made them bigger than

the plans, but there were no plans for the washing table. Liam, with help from his father, designed the tables — tweaking the design right into the building phase — which will be used to wash and dry vegetables on harvest day.

Realizing that budgets are tight for non-profits, Liam initiated a fundraising campaign to cover the cost of the building materials. He was so successful that not only did the funds cover the supplies, but there was another \$500 to help with Judea Garden’s mission. With the money in hand, Liam gathered his crew of 15 and got the job done. Come by Judea Garden and see just what this Eagle Scout accomplished.

All volunteers are welcome in Judea Garden whether you have 15 minutes or 5 hours, can come twice a week or once a season. Connect to the earth while the beauty of Macricostas Preserve sur-



Photo: Holly Shannon

Liam and Denise on a finished project.

rounds you as you make a difference in the lives of others. Check our website for this and other volunteering opportunities.

Judea Garden, the Giving Garden, grows, harvests and distributes vegetables, herbs and fruit at Macricostas Preserve for our neighbors in need. It is a volunteer-based project that produces three to four thousand pounds of food each year — 30,000 pounds since it was started nine years ago.

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