

**Natural Playground Project  
Mount Vernon Unitarian Church/Fort Hunt Preschool**

**by Gioia Chilton - April 2007**

You may have noticed that the Mount Vernon Unitarian Church playground is in need of new equipment. The large wooden playground climbing structure and slide structure must be replaced as they are rotting. We are told the structure was originally built sometime around 1985 or 1986, making it about 20 years old, and it is becoming a safety hazard. The church and preschool, working in partnership, will be replacing the current structures with a “natural playground”.

Using funds donated by the Susan B. Anthony Fund and the Fort Hunt Preschool, we have hired Nancy Striniste to design this playground. Nancy received her BS in Education from Wheelock College. She has studied design and children's spaces at the College of Design at North Carolina State University, Tufts University and Harvard Graduate School of Design and holds a Graduate Certificate in Landscape Design from George Washington University.

**What is a Natural Playground? And why do we want one?**

*"Natural playgrounds are play environments that blend natural materials, features, and indigenous vegetation with creative landforms to create purposely complex interplays of natural, environmental objects in ways that challenge and fascinate children and teach them about the wonders and intricacies of the natural world while they play within it. Play components may include earth shapes (sculptures), environmental art, indigenous vegetation (trees, shrubs, grasses, flowers, lichens, mosses), boulders or other rock structures, dirt and sand, natural fences (stone, willow, wooden), textured pathways, and natural water features. Typically, natural play environments are less costly, safer, and have higher play value than manufactured playgrounds."*(source <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Playground>)

We are told that natural play and learning environments are less expensive than traditional plastic playground equipment, more earth friendly, sustainable, curriculum-based, beautiful, challenging, and discovery-oriented, and that children, teachers, and parents love them.

This concept is synchronic with both the church's and preschool's philosophy. As you know, Unitarian Universalists believe in the interdependent web of all life. UUs honor the earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature. An action goal of the Green Sanctuary committee is to make our church more environmentally benign and to grow a sense of environmental responsibility in our congregation and the surrounding community. Transforming the current playground into a natural playground is congruent with these aims.

At Fort Hunt Preschool, the children go outside for a large part of almost every day, and all classes have a strong emphasis on nature and observing the seasonal changes on MVUC's

serene grounds. So a natural playground is also a good fit for the preschool, as well, building upon the current, child-centered, strengths of the program.

Nancy Striniste writes, "By considering the environmental implications of the design, and designing with an eye to sustainability, we not only help to care for our ecosystem and watershed, but we also demonstrate general respect for the earth as well as specific building, planting and construction techniques to the children and adults who use the space."

We will be removing the deteriorating equipment and in its place, creating an earth-friendly, child-friendly outdoor playspace. Nancy writes, "The goal of this project will be to enhance the outdoor areas to provide a variety of play opportunities for the children served, who are ages two to five as well as Sunday school children who are preschool, school-aged and teens. The playground includes one main play area, possibly an adjacent grassy lawn, a paved area, and separate spaces adjacent to the back and sides of the carriage house. The space should provide unique opportunities for movement and physical activity, for seating and quiet play and for experimentation and creativity. Specific priorities include dealing with drainage problems in an environmentally sensitive way, creating a riding path and also creating a little hill with a slide set into it. Other elements to consider include raised bed garden and digging areas and the removal or creative reuse of an unused large metal swing frame. The design might include some green building elements, such as playhouses made of cob or straw bale, and a living roof on some element in the space."

Nancy Striniste stated that "purchasing equipment (climbers and other gross motor pieces) and hardscape (stone walls, patios, rubber surfacing) is the most expensive part. The sort of green building-- cob and straw bale -- that we were discussing, is very low cost, but very very high in sweat equity requirements." This project will offer unique opportunities for FHP and MVUC parents, adults, youth and teens to get involved.

### **Next Steps**

If you would like to have input into the process or share ideas contact Nancy Striniste at [nstriniste@verizon.net](mailto:nstriniste@verizon.net) with suggestions or come to the Charrette. (A charrette is "the creative process akin to visual brainstorming that is used by professionals to develop solutions to a design problem within a limited time frame."). This will be held on Thursday, May 31, 7-9 PM. To see some of her ideas, visit her website at <http://www.earlyspace.com/>

Future fundraising plans may include a series of spaghetti dinners organized by the preschool, the on-going Pennies for the Playground jars at the preschool, possible future requests from future Susan B. Anthony fund, and outside grant sources such as Lowe's.

It is hoped that this project will help build community among Church and Preschool members, raise ecological awareness, and provide a unique place for children from the Mount Vernon area to grow, learn, and thrive through play.