

**Cultivating the Wild on Chicago's South Side:
Stories of People and Nature at Eden Place Nature Center**

Michael Bryson and Michael Howard

The red-tailed hawk cruises high over the city, the broad blue expanse of Lake Michigan behind him. Below, a tangled landscape of apartment buildings and houses, roads and railways, vacant lots, and fragmented bits of urban forest run west to the far horizon. His sharp eyes rove past the fourteen-lane-wide Dan Ryan Expressway that cuts a long scar down the South Side of Chicago, separating neighborhoods from each other and moving tens of thousands of vehicles per day. Just a few blocks west of that obscenely huge road is a tiny green oasis, a rectangle of calm and quiet at 44th and Stewart. He heads toward it with swift wing beats, then rides the thermals generated from the city's urban heat island effect, checking for the telltale movements of his next potential meal.

Michael Howard looks over his charges. More than three hundred young African-American schoolchildren are gathered around him here at Eden Place Nature Center, a green sanctuary for both people and nature in Fuller Park, one of Chicago's most isolated, contaminated, and poorest communities. The kids gambol in the sunshine and outside air, reveling in the freedom of release from their classrooms for a day of hands-on learning about the world. They squish their feet along a wetland's edge, decorate pumpkins, take hayrides, pet farm animals, and yell out questions to their heart's content. Few, if any, have ever seen a goat in the flesh, or had an ornery goose nip at their heels—and they are joyful and overwhelmed by the novelty.

Michael is an articulate and dynamic presence, a teacher who uses whatever materials and critters are at hand at any given moment to communicate his love for nature, to share an ecology lesson, to tell a story about the earth and our place within it. Suddenly a few children notice some nervous movements among Eden Place's flock of chickens. As Michael recalls,

Someone said, "Why are the chickens acting like that, Mr. Howard?" I replied, "Well, they usually only do that when there's something above them." And sure enough, there was a big red-tailed hawk above. He was just soaring. So I told all the kids, "OK, everybody, I want you to just look straight up. Don't look into the sun, just look straight up into the blue sky, and you're gonna see Mr. Hawk. He's circling." He was very low at the time, and so everybody's heads were up like this, and you heard this "Oooh, I see it, I see it, Oh!"

I said, "Yes, that's a red-tailed hawk, and he's actually soaring on the thermals, the warm breezes that are blowing right now. You'll notice his wings are made so that all he has to do is keep them spread; when the wind blows over them, it's actually holding him up. He doesn't even have to flap. You see, he's not even flapping his wings, but he's able to bank and turn. See how he's going around in circles?" And everybody's goin', "Ooh, wow, Mr. Howard, wow! Is that a real hawk?" And I said, "Oh, yeah." But as they watched the hawk, he started spiraling up. And the kids said, "Mr. Howard, he getting' smaller!" I said, "That's because he's going higher and higher." Everybody watched—and by the time they couldn't see him anymore, they started clapping. And that was great.

That brief yet dramatic hawk-child encounter tells us much about the manifestation of wildness in urban environments, and the fundamental need for and value of contacting nature directly within our large cities, where steel and concrete dominate the landscape and children's access to healthy green spaces can be limited. Such encounters are often, as elsewhere in nature, random and unexpected—and they provide a source of joy and surprise, intrigue and edification for humans young and old. On the other hand, that red-tailed hawk—a commonly seen species throughout Illinois but still a delightful presence in an inner-city environment where green space is at a premium—instinctively sought out Eden Place as a rich source of food within a desert of pavement. Hence the simple yet profound ecological value of even the humblest of urban green spaces. Habitat—home for both wild creatures and city-bound people.

This, then, is one of the many secrets of Eden Place, a small-scale urban space reclaimed from decades of abandonment and contamination. A place which welcomes both the tame and the wild, the human and nonhuman; which provides a theatre for their meaningful interaction; and which stokes the innate wildness within each of us. Eden Place and the human stories it engenders are thus about many things simultaneously: rebuilding positive connections to nature, facilitating encounters with the wild (however it is manifest), building community one family and one neighborhood at a time, and healing wounds of racial and environmental injustice inflicted over centuries.

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The Fuller Park community in Chicago is an unlikely setting for a natural oasis like Eden Place Nature Center. The smallest neighborhood in this city of 2.8 million people, Fuller Park has long been one of its most physically beleaguered. Bounded by freight and passenger railroads to the east and west, bisected by the perpetually roaring Dan Ryan Expressway, and beset by persistent

poverty and sporadic violence, this 97% minority community was for many years best known for two things: illegal dumping of waste, hazardous and otherwise, in its many vacant lots; and pervasive lead contamination within the soil and residents' homes.

Just over twenty years ago, Michael and Amelia Howard moved back to Fuller Park and Amelia's childhood home in search of their roots and driven by their dedication to community advocacy. They didn't start out with a desire to be environmental activists or restoration ecologists; but in clearing a nearby vacant lot of a two-stories-high mountain of illegally dumped waste in the late 1990s with the help of countless volunteers, they created Eden Place—a 3.4-acre urban farm and environmental education site with gardens, livestock, barns, compost piles, ponds, trails, and what Michael calls “reasonable facsimiles” of native Illinois ecosystems.

The early stages of an oak savannah and prairie restoration take up the north half of this refuge, the only bona fide nature center on the entire south side of the city. A small pond and cattail-lined wetland are found between the prairie and the farmyard. Modestly sized and brightly painted barns stand against the tall concrete embankment of the railroad that looms along Eden Place's western border. Exhaust-streaked trains, passenger and freight, clatter by at short intervals. Too often, freight lines stop and idle here, engines rumbling, diesel fumes thick in the air. Raised-bed gardens sport squash, beans, peppers, tomatoes, and herbs.

The Howards' ongoing dedication to this project in Fuller Park is a monumentally unlikely and remarkably inspiring tale of environmental reclamation and neighborhood redemption—one which in its early days sparked violent threats from gang members who were upset at the encroachment upon part of their turf, but which quickly garnered the support of neighborhood citizens young and old. Now a valued and respected institution with two locations in the Fuller Park neighborhood—the original Nature Center and a more recently acquired three-

acre farm extension site several blocks south—Eden Place’s mission encompasses growing food, providing natural habitat, serving as a safe haven within the community, fostering environmental awareness, and fighting urban blight and decay by dint of its very existence. As Michael puts it,

Eden Place puts out tentacles because it’s a doorway to nature. That’s our mantra: the doorway to nature on the South Side of Chicago. And so we put out tentacles and allow urban people to travel on those tentacles to experience the different levels of wild that exist—from the Boundary Waters to the State Fair to the Shawnee National Forest, from the Cook County Forest Preserves to the Wisconsin Dells. We put those tentacles out and make these roads that families and children travel in what we call fun yet educational experiences—we’re about education, but we do it in a way that’s fun because of how that ingrains on the heart. We’re trying to build stewards. We try to show the importance of sustaining these different wilds that Eden Place exposes these families and youth to, so that we can start building stewards in this urban environment that are so disconnected.

By cultivating an ethic of stewardship through a basic appreciation of the natural world, Eden Place opens doorways to youth and their families to explore nature outside of, even far from, Chicago. At the same time, though, these experiences of camping, hiking, canoeing, and exploring provide new perspectives that impact their lives in the city. Eden Place itself, as a constantly evolving green space, provides opportunities for putting a newly acquired environmental ethic of care into practice, whether that means tending a community garden plot, feeding the livestock as a volunteer, or teaching kids about the value of wetlands.

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Lamont was an eight- or nine-year-old boy who became a regular at Eden Place one summer—not as a formal member of a camp youth group, but as a neighborhood kid coming over on his own, looking for something to do, tacitly seeking encouragement and support. Living with his cousin’s unstable family, he experienced a turbulent home environment that summer and thus Eden Place became a daily refuge for him, as has been the case with many children over the years. One day, as Michael related, Lamont came up to him brimming with excitement.

“Mr. Howard, Mr. Howard—there’s one of them dinosaur birds down at the little pond!” I said, “Dinosaur bird? OK, you gotta show me this.” Because I hadn’t seen a pterodactyl in a long time. So we went down to the pond, but I didn’t see anything. At the time, I just played it off and said, “I guess he just flew away.” The next day, though, Lamont came back and said, “Mr. Howard, that bird back there!” I said, “OK, let’s go see that bird”—and so, I went to look, and there it was, standing there among the mulberry trees we used to have down by the little pond; but it flew away so fast I only got a glimpse of it.

The next day I went back looking for this bird, because from the beginning I didn’t really believe the young man’s description. This time I got a better look at it, and it looked like a juvenile great blue heron—small, wasn’t as large as he was gonna get, and he was in fact down at the little pond. So I had to go back to Lamont and apologize. I said, “You know what? He *does* look like a dinosaur bird! You got great observation powers.” And so throughout that summer all he

did was identify birds. . . That bird stayed around for a little over a week until he just finally disappeared.

What was interesting to me about this young kid is how that one moment of observation turned him on, you know—he really just wanted to be able to recognize every bird so that he could come back and tell me the name. And so for the rest of the summer, that’s what he did: he started auditing the different birds, and I gave him some pictures and a journal to write down his sightings. His math ability improved because we showed him how to calculate the number of sightings and the percentages of each species and put this into a computer spreadsheet. We’re always trying to take every day and translate it into a greater learning experience.

We don’t discount the potential of our kids at Eden Place, because we see them do so much on their own that amazes us. I’m able to recognize this potential, and if you give them the tools and show them how to use them, these kids are phenomenal.

While Eden Place provides a space for many such encounters with the non-human world, it also inspires us to reflect on and challenge what we mean by “the wild” in a contemporary urban landscape. “When we created Eden Place,” Michael said, “the thought was this: if we build it, the wild will come.” And so it has over the last fifteen or so years. Red-tailed hawks. Migrating songbirds. Raccoon, opossum, skunk. White-tailed deer, seen in the damp mist at two in the morning.

Here, despite the nearby expanses of concrete, ubiquitous air pollution, and roar of train traffic, pigeons and red foxes forage for food and shelter, and nature manifests its power in various guises—from the weeds tenaciously sprouting up in sidewalk cracks to the lone coyote hunting for stray chickens in the farmyard. Fine distinctions between wild and agricultural, or between native and non-native species, matter much less in this context than the provision of many potential points of contact among humans, plants, and animals. To a child who has never gone camping, or been on a farm, or gone to the zoo, or hiked in a wilderness preserve, the sighting of a hawk or a head-butt from a frisky farm goat is a meaningful first encounter with the wild.

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During a visit to Eden Place, one is immediately struck by the people—their quickness to welcome, their warmth and fundamental kindness—even more than the visually arresting landscape. Eden Place is first and foremost a *human* oasis, a space in which people of all ages, races, creeds, and abilities can converge in an economically struggling neighborhood in the heart of Chicago’s South Side to find conversation, fun, joy, a little music, mud to step in, meaningful work for body and mind, a shade tree, a cool drink, animals to watch, and pets to feed. Eden Place cultivates friendship, camaraderie, and laughter amidst the earnest, honest work of growing healthy food and stewarding an urban ecosystem.

The Howards build this sense of community by offering a staggering range of events and activities—seasonal festivals, nature walks, gardening workshops, camping trips, children’s day camps, school field trips—but also by providing time and space for impromptu gatherings or solitary reflection. Just by dint of its presence, as a place for anyone to come and explore—five days a week; rain, shine, or snow—Eden Place brings folks together under an umbrella of

acceptance, something Michael and Amelia realized in a new and powerful way one spring. As he reflected,

We were having an Earth Day festival the third or fourth year of Eden Place. It was a beautiful spring day, things were going good, and I was moving around, the staff were doing their thing at the booths; and then I noticed this lady crying. She was standing there with her hands over her face, crying. I immediately went into panic mode, and said, “What’s the matter? What’s wrong? What’s happening?” She didn’t answer and just shook her head. I said again, greatly concerned, “What’s wrong, what can I do to help?” And she said, “Oh, no, no. No, no. This is good tears.” I said, “OK, you scared me. What’s going on?” And she said, “Look!”

I turned around, and there was this man, dancing with his daughter to the music of the DJ, spinning her around. I said, “Yeah, that’s nice.” She replied, “No, you don’t understand. He don’t play with his kids. This is the first time he’s ever played with his kids. It’s not that he don’t love ‘em; it’s just that he always hard-working and then he’s too tired. I’m so glad we came here today because this is the first time he’s really relaxed and everybody’s just havin’ a good time and you have such a great place.” And she started telling us how great it was that this space has helped her family just able to relax.

That’s when I started understanding that Eden Place was considered a place of safety. It was a safe haven. That’s why a lot of parents will let their children come here, because they feel—and this is their words, not mine—that “Mr. Howard ain’t gonna let nothin’ happen at Eden Place.”

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Wild spaces are often viewed as sites of healing, of reconnection, of sanctuary from the tumult and stress of the modern world. In national and state parklands, wildlife refuges, and wilderness areas, through monumental efforts that most Americans now take completely for granted, nature has been preserved in various degrees of wildness. These ostensibly “natural” but nonetheless carefully managed lands serve as important repositories of biodiversity by providing wildlife habitat. They also function as places in which humans privileged enough to afford the time and expense of travel may encounter said wildlife, mostly in rural surroundings remote from urban centers where the vast majority of Americans now live. But these senses of the wild—as a state of being, a place to visit, or a mode of recreation—constitute a primarily white middle-to-upper class understanding of how one experiences an increasingly commodified (and thus threatened) nature. This is the wild that is defined, in part, as devoid of human presence—even when this perceived absence is more fantasy than reality.

Such a sense of the wild, though, is not necessarily shared by African-Americans—particularly those who experienced, as Michael notes, “the disconnect from the land that took place because of the Great Migration”—who grew up in cities and left behind their rural southern roots. The Howards fully recognize and are sensitive to this perspective, which at times serves as a conversational stumbling block in their interactions with some African-American children, teens, and adults who have no interest in, no connection with, but plenty of ingrained fear of wild nature; or who understandably associate working the soil with, as Michael says, “the horror stories of slavery, about people escaping through swamps and forests,” and the subsequent disenfranchisement of Jim Crow society.

All these people were running from the farm . . . So for a lot of African-Americans back then, the wild, the forest, the woods—that's the boogeyland. We don't want to go there, we've had negative experiences there. Our forefathers died in that swamp; our forefathers were tracked down and hanged from the trees in those woods. There was a long period in which African-Americans in America didn't get any joy in the wild in the same way that everyone else did that came to America.

When African-American farmers were freed, they wanted land, they wanted a mule, and all the rest. The Jim Crow era, though, did a lot of damage by dissuading African-Americans from making a living through farming, whereas the Europeans who were still coming in on boats to Ellis Island were given access to land. America gave away millions and millions of acres out West, and then they turned right around and gave up the land to the same Europeans but not to the ex-slaves. They set up the land grant colleges to help the farmers learn how to work the land, to teach them. They set up county agents as a resource of how to grow food and be successful at it. Then they provided low-interest loans so they could mechanize their farms. They were given all kinds of support so European-Americans could succeed farming this great land and opening up this great space.

Michael reflects upon this history as we sit in his office on Eden Place's new three-acre property several blocks south of the Nature Center—an old industrial building with loading bays and vacant lots on either side. Covered with gravel, broken concrete, and the remnant snow of a recent January storm, the damaged soil of this extension site

figures large in Michael's plans for expanding Eden Place's farming operation. He speaks earnestly, surely mindful of the ironic contrast between, on one hand, his vision of sustainable urban farming on Chicago's South Side that is interwoven with the goal of community economic development and, on the other, the disenfranchisement of America's rural black farmers, who only now have received belated recognition of their past ill-treatment. "Just two years ago, they finally received some recognition in a lawsuit that went to the Supreme Court about the disparity with which the USDA has long treated black farmers in America," he notes, though that wasn't the end of the story. He continues:

Though the suit favored the farmers who were named directly, it really wasn't a true reason to celebrate because it failed to recognize thousands of other African-American farmers who had lost their land, whose families had been put off of the land, who were never compensated. Their heritage and the wealth that they lost as a family just dissipated, or were transferred to whatever county or state that took the farm for taxes.

These types of injustices have forced African-Americans to turn their backs on any kind of land value. We had land ethics, because we worked the land all the way back to Africa. We worked lands a lot of people would call arid or infertile to be able to support families and tribes. [In America], we were able to support families even on the plantations when they'd allow you to grow on some bad patch of land that they considered inhabitable for any real type of production; even there, we were able to scratch out enough to live.

I actually witnessed that with my great-grandmother. She taught me how to pick cotton, how to hoe a row of beans. A sharecropper in Haynes, Arkansas, decades ago, this woman fed me and her for the entire summer on a dusty piece of ground that she fertilized with the mud from the pig pen and the chickens.

As Michael tells this story, his eyes light up with memories of his ancestors and the resourcefulness of his great-grandmother, and he notices my gaze falling on the row of hand tools (including a hoe) propped up in one corner of his office. Much of the labor invested in Eden Place's gardens and natural areas is, viewed properly, solar-powered—an energy transfer embodied in those old-fashioned tools that teach lessons as well as turn the soil. Michael sees the connection between doing the labor of urban farming today and reclaiming cultural wisdom from the past. He admits,

The youth of today don't know their history, and so therefore they're destined to repeat some of it. If they don't learn their history, though, they're gonna fall for the same rope-a-dope that their ancestors fell for—not so much fell for, but had to suffer through because of people's ignorance or indifference. And so it's very important that I teach a lot of history when I teach about the land ethic and the wilds of America that we have disassociated ourselves from. Urban African-Americans need to understand that their forefathers were experts in the fields of farming, wilderness survival, and living off the land. They must acknowledge that if it hadn't been for that expertise of their great-great-great grandfathers and their great-great-great grandmothers, they wouldn't be here today.

This expertise is embodied in the knowledge and land ethic of Michael Howard, his family, and their dedicated team of volunteers. It is expressed in the related acts of healing the soil of Eden Place and transforming the spirits of its human visitors. Eden Place serves as a site to repair, one person, one child, one family at a time, the damage of several centuries' worth of cultural dissociation from the natural world.

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It is difficult to adequately assess the ecological impact of projects like Eden Place on Chicago. From a bird's-eye view, a 3.4-acre nature preserve/farm/education center is a mere scratch on a very large urban palimpsest, a place arguably too small to significantly enhance the city's overall biodiversity or even mitigate the urban heat island effect of the Fuller Park neighborhood. The true impact, perhaps, is measured person by person, in human terms. As Amelia Howard has often said,

Not everyone who comes to Eden Place will become an environmentalist. But if they become a lawyer, they'll become a green, environmental-minded lawyer. If they become a doctor, they'll be more homeopathic because they'll learn about the full nutritional standards that food coming out of the ground supplies to your body naturally, and how if you build a good foundation in your children's bones and in their blood when they're young, it'll protect them when they're older.

Whatever you do, what you learn here at Eden Place will help you be better at it.

Restoring nature to a glorious past is not the *raison d'être* of this site, which features, at its best, “reasonable facsimiles” of Illinois’ native ecosystems. But by taking a less-than-a-mile hike from the ear-shattering noise of the 47th Street stop on the Red Line elevated train to the peaceful and surprisingly quiet borders of Eden Place, one can immediately recognize that human restoration is its real and perhaps most valuable purpose. The Howards know this: no matter a person’s racial identity or prior ideas about nature before arriving at Eden Place, he or she will come away thinking differently about themselves and their role in the world after visiting such a place.

And what of the wild, both around and within us? How do reclaimed inner-city green spaces like Eden Place cultivate wildness? Michael Howard’s mantra is a deceptively simple truth: “If we build it, the wild will come.” Not just refuge-seeking animals, the furtive coyote, and the soaring hawk, but also the teeming microbes and invertebrates of a restored topsoil enriched by years of compost and rooted with prairie forbs and grasses. These, too, are manifestations of the wild. Not just the acquisition of ecological literacy among children and their families, but also the renewed joy of working the soil, tending vegetables and greens, planting trees—small acts of stewardship and healing that, bit by bit, counteract decades of alienation, fear, and cultural trauma. These, too, are reclamations of the wild through both bodily labor and cultural memory. At Eden Place, the wild is not simply *there*; it is always in the process of being remade.