

2024 BACKPACK PROJECT

What a summer! Your generosity helped Brushwood Center and our community partners create and distribute 1,500 bilingual Nature Explorer Backpacks / Mochilas de Explorador to youth and families in Waukegan, North Chicago, Round Lake, Gurnee, and Highwood this year.

The Nature Explorer Backpack Project began in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, but has become an annual tool for connecting youth and families to the many benefits of art and nature, while breaking down barriers to accessing Lake County's green and blue spaces. Our community partners distribute the Backpacks at locally-organized events where families can engage in hands-on activities and nature walks.



BRUSHWOOD CENTER
AT RYERSON WOODS
21850 N. Riverwoods Road
Riverwoods, IL 60015

BRUSHWOOD CENTER NORTH
415 Washington Street
Suite 009
Waukegan, IL 60085

For more information on Brushwood Center and to support the 2025 Nature Explorer Backpack Project, please contact:

Mirja Spooner Haffner
Director of Development
mspoonerhaffner@brushwoodcenter.org
224.633.2424 ext. 6



@BrushwoodCenter

BRUSHWOODCENTER.ORG

VISION

We work toward a future of resilient and connected communities, both human and ecological, where all lead healthy and thriving lives.

MISSION

Brushwood Center works collaboratively with artists, health care providers, and scientists to improve health equity and access to nature in Lake County, Illinois, and the Chicago region. We engage people with the outdoors through the arts, environmental education, and community action. Brushwood Center's programs focus on youth, families, Military Veterans, and those facing racial and economic injustices.

2024 NATURE EXPLORER BACKPACK PROJECT



BRUSHWOOD

2024 BY THE NUMBERS



Over **2,000** students received bilingual art and nature activity books.



1,500 backpacks distributed to families in Waukegan, Round Lake, North Chicago, Gurnee, and Highwood.



22 distribution events with **13** community partners.



Over **100** volunteers at Grainger, BCU Credit Union, and Blue Cross Blue Shield of IL, participated in backpack packing events.

30+ volunteers from the Community Outreach Council at Northwestern Lake Forest Hospital packaged native seeds for the backpacks.



2024 IMPACT



A growing body of research points to connections between time spent outside in nature and improved health. Time in greenspaces is particularly beneficial to children, improving everything from vision to attention.

Lake County has beautiful natural assets, but many communities face barriers to accessing them, including transportation, language, infrastructure, and policy. *The Nature Explorer Backpack/Mochilas de Explorador* aims to increase equitable access to the many health benefits of nature, strengthen environmental awareness and action through youth empowerment, and cultivate rich cultural connections to the natural world.

In alignment with the recommendations from Brushwood's recently released report, *Health, Equity, and Nature: A Changing Climate in Lake County, IL*, The Nature Explorer Backpack Project aims to empower young people as change-makers to help address systemic environmental and health injustices in our communities.

Over **75%** of survey respondents reported feeling more confident exploring nature with their families using their Nature Explorer Backpacks.



This year, the Backpack contents and accompanying programs focused on supporting children and their emotional health and wellbeing, using the stories of healing trauma on the land in Lake County (i.e., converted brownfield sites, the restored Waukegan dunes, etc.). Brushwood Center provided activities, tools, resources and a bilingual nature explorer activity book, *Planting Seeds*, for coping with individual and community climate anxiety through collective action and social emotional skill building.

"Families loved the backpacks and the fact that it's one less expense especially with rising cost of living and wage increases not matching that."

Maria Colunga
Community Outreach & Engagement Specialist, Round Lake Bilingual Parent Advisory Committee

100% of respondents expressed continued interest in using the Backpacks to explore nature together in the future



We asked families who received Nature Explorer Backpacks how they're using them. Here are some of their responses:



"We went to the forest preserve and she used the magnifying glass to look closely at everything including bugs!"

"This is my first time receiving the Nature Explorer Backpack. And I am looking forward to many special trips!"



2024 DISTRIBUTION PARTNERS

- Cool Learning Experience
- Sharing Our Shore-Waukegan (SOS-W)
- Heart of the City (HOTC)
- HACES Illinois
- Waukegan Public Library
- Nuestro Center
- Round Lake Area Public Library
- Kids Rank
- Round Lake Bilingual Parent Advisory
- North Chicago Library
- Mano a Mano
- Warren Newport Public Library
- Highwood Library

2024 BACKPACK SPONSORS

- Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Illinois
- The Buchanan Family Foundation
- Community Outreach Council at Northwestern Lake Forest Hospital
- Forest Service International Foundation
- USDA Forest Service
- Grainger
- Grainger Foundation
- Jonathan Huisel
- Northwestern Medicine
- Synchrony
- Wintrust Community Banks

Did You Know?

Research shows that access to nature is critical for youth, leading to:

- Increased development of creative problem solving skills
- Increased social and emotional skills
- Increased physical activity, which reduces anxiety and depression