thrive

REIMAGINING A COLLECTIVE FUTURE OF ABUNDANCE | FALL 2026



Health, Equity, and Nature Accelerator Issue:
Celebrating Five Years of Change!

43RD ANNUAL SMITH NATURE SYMPOSIUM
Honoring Karenna Gore

BRUSHWOOD LAUNCHES
Maternal Environmental Health Training

BRUSHWOOD

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Seasonal Newsletter

thrive

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thrive
Brushwood's seasonal newsletter for collective change!

Thrive is a print and digital publication that helps us reimagine a collective future of abundance.

Special thanks to our contributors, editors, and artists for elevating the intersectional issues of health equity, access to nature, environmental justice, and more in our Lake County and Chicago region community.

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PHOTOGRAPHY THIS ISSUE:
In Life Photography, Michael Kardas Photography, Jenna Jo Pawlicki, and Brushwood Staff & Contributors

PHOTOS: (COVER) **A day outside with Radical Hope in the Woods, a new program of the Brushwood Health, Equity, and Nature Accelerator designed to reconnect Black and African-Americans with nature.**

43RD ANNUAL SMITH NATURE SYMPOSIUM AWARDS DINNER

HONORARY CHAIR
AMY MORRISON HEINRICH

CHAIR
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SATURDAY, OCTOBER 10, 2026
5:30 - 9:00 PM
CHICAGO BOTANIC GARDEN
1000 LAKE COOK ROAD, GLENCOE, ILLINOIS

FROM THE GROUND UP

A CALL TO REIMAGINE OUR PLACE IN NATURE



2026 ENVIRONMENTAL LEADERSHIP AWARD RECIPIENT

KARENNA GORE

AUTHOR, CLIMATE ACTIVIST, AND
FOUNDER OF THE CENTER FOR EARTH ETHICS





The Health, Equity and Nature Accelerator:

Celebrating Five Years of Change in Lake County

By Dani Abboud

Guess what just turned five? Brushwood Center's Health, Equity, and Nature Accelerator! The past five years have taken us places we couldn't imagine in 2021, and now in 2026 we're looking back on the partnerships, initiatives, and conversations the Accelerator has fostered, and looking forward to an even bolder future.

When the Accelerator launched in 2021, Brushwood's programs had long focused on the importance of increasing access to nature and the arts for individual and community well-being, but there were often roadblocks. Structural inequities, the legacies of environmental degradation and systemic racism, all exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, made it abundantly clear that programming alone was not enough.

Lake County residents deserved more, and we needed real, strategic, long-term change. Building on a legacy of community organizing and environmental justice in Lake County, this project was the next evolution in Brushwood's commitment to health and nature, and a catalyst for visioning new paths forward. The Health, Equity, and Nature Accelerator was born.

As Ashley Cullen-Williams, Brushwood's Senior Program Director, remarked at a spring event celebrating this milestone, "Before the Health, Equity, and Nature Accelerator, much of this work in Lake County was happening with deep care, but often in silos. Organizations were stretched. Communities were being served, but not always centered. And nature—though always present—was not always recognized as a core part of healing or equity. [Organizations] were doing important work, but without fully naming the connection between clean air, green space, water, and human wellbeing. And yet, the truth was always there. Mother Earth has never stopped providing—air that allows us to breathe, water that sustains life, land that holds us, and green spaces that restore us. The issue was never scarcity. It was access, connection, and intention."

The Accelerator was designed to activate investment in health and nature-based solutions and drive collaboration among community, governmental, environmental, and healthcare sectors. The first project, creating a report on the status of Lake County's nature and health equity, took two years, extensive collaboration, and a lot of creativity. Published in 2023, Health, Equity, and Nature: A Changing Climate in Lake County, Illinois (HEN Report), was the first report of its kind, overlaying social drivers of health, environmental inequities, and health disparities across the county. Interwoven with this data was beautiful artwork and joyful community reflections, and the overwhelming rallying cry to build new systems that work for everyone.

To date, over 5,000 print and digital copies of the HEN Report have been distributed, both in English and Spanish. The report has been shared with and by a diverse range of groups, from community members and residents, to health care providers, climate change communities and forums, and regional institutions, spurring countless conversations around how to address health inequities in our region.

Based on data gathered from partners, it is estimated that more than $4 million of investment has come into Lake County organizations and communities through grant-writing efforts supported by data and statistics from the HEN Report. The impact was not only material; partners shared that the report shifted the conversation around health and nature in Lake County, both on the ground where the work is happening and in philanthropic giving.



What's Happening Now

The HEN Report concludes with a list of more than fifty different recommendations for action, ranging from program considerations to needed policy shifts. Through interviews and share-outs at the HEN Anniversary Celebration, our community partners shared powerful examples of community-driven, intersectional and equity-focused initiatives underway in Lake County.

Here are just a few of them:

Nature Everywhere Waukegan

In 2025, Waukegan joined over 100 Nature Everywhere Communities — a national initiative led by the Children & Nature Network — supported with technical guidance to increase equitable access to nature everywhere children and families live, learn, and play. Being part of this network means Waukegan benefits from national research, peer learning, and proven strategies — while contributing its own story to a growing movement. Nature Everywhere Waukegan launched as a collaborative effort of local grassroots partners, including the city, schools, nonprofits, and individuals, with representation from youth leadership, environmental justice, parks and recreation, and conservation sectors to advance our vision and strategies.

Urban Farm Center

College of Lake County's Urban Farm Center was an idea brought from community stakeholders to CLC to support hands-on learning, food production, and entrepreneurial support. This 24,000 square-foot facility supports local food systems in a community long over-burdened by food insecurity and diet-related health disparities, like diabetes and heart disease. This site will be home to three businesses:

- **Lakeshore Farm**, a year-round growing space offering training and production in microgreens, mushroom, and vertical hydroponic growing;
- **Lakeshore Kitchen**, a shared commercial kitchen for small food entrepreneurs to grow their business, culinary and nutrition education, and farm-to-table meals for students and community; and
- **Lancer Fresh Zone**, a retail space for locally grown produce, prepared foods from Lakeshore Kitchen, and locally produced food products.

This space will help create career pathways in agriculture and food-related fields for students in Waukegan, support small business growth, expand access to fresh, local food, strengthen regional supply chains and contribute to the economic revitalization of downtown Waukegan.

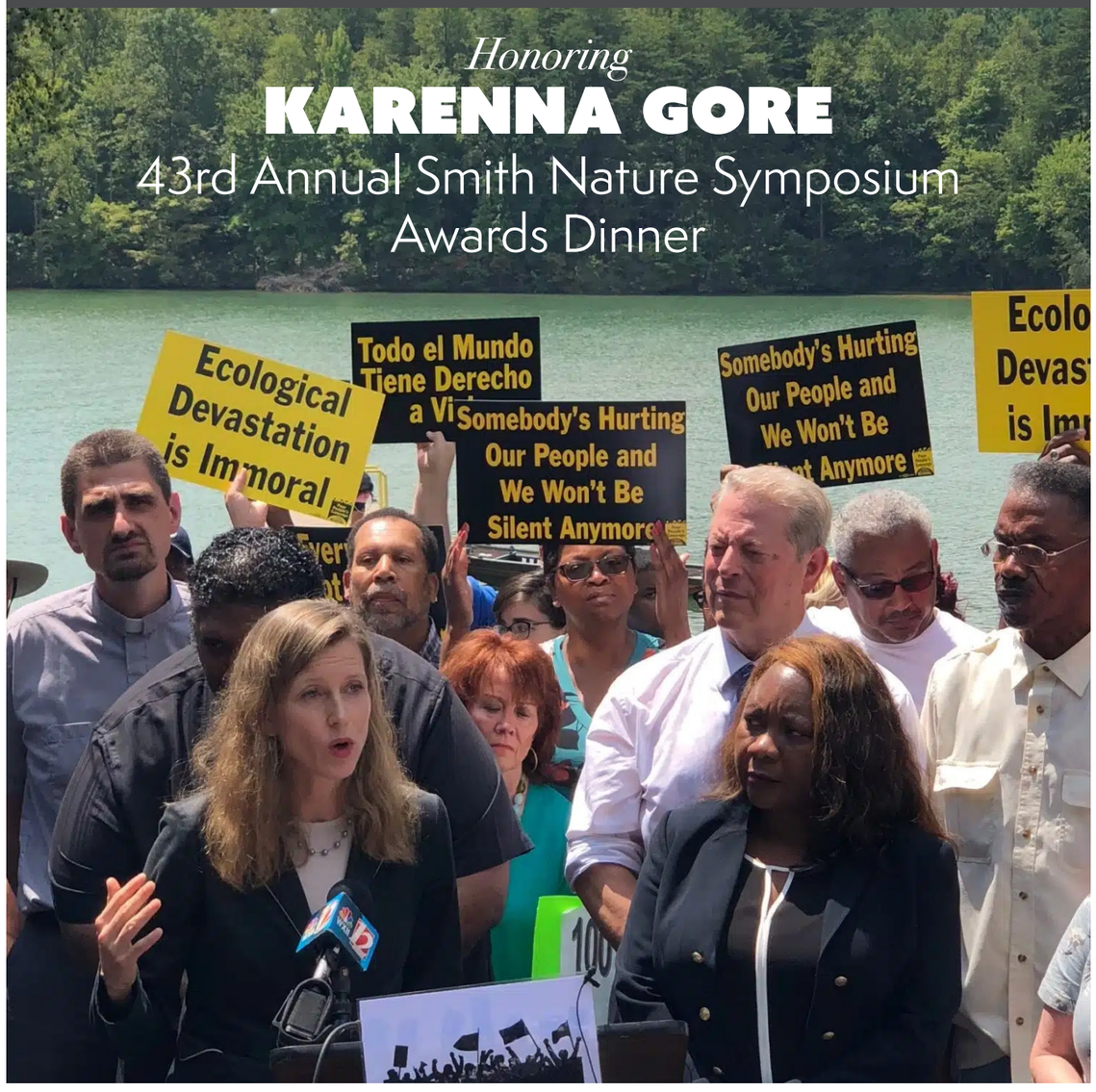
Rosalind Franklin University

Following the release of the HEN Report, leaders from Rosalind Franklin University in North Chicago, like Dr. Melissa Chen, seized the opportunity to educate students on local health and environmental disparities. The HEN Report executive summary has become required reading for medical students at RFU. Additionally, Dr. Chen has distributed copies to colleagues, clinicians from out of state who work at RFU's health clinic, and used it to help drive conversations on how the university can better serve surrounding communities. Dr. Chen also began hosting RFU's Community Days, an annual event where students can connect with local leaders, community organizers, and change makers to better understand the needs and assets of Lake County, IL. These events have been a huge success: 90% of surveyed students reported increased understanding of local health inequities, 85% reported increased knowledge of the impact of structural forces on health outcomes, and 84% reported being more likely to become involved in Lake County community organizations.

Where We're Going

The HEN Anniversary Celebration ended with table discussions and group visioning exercises. Attendees were challenged to dream big and imagine the kinds of programs, initiatives and resources that could take community health work to the next level. They were then invited to brainstorm what resources and support were needed to make these visions possible. The room crackled with energy, lively discussions, and joy, as we imagined together what might be possible for Lake County. Stay tuned to see what the next five years will bring for impact in Lake County!

Learn more by reading the full Five Year Anniversary Report here.



Join Brushwood Center on Saturday, October 10, 2026, at the Chicago Botanic Garden to honor Karenna Gore at the Smith Nature Symposium Awards Dinner.

The 2026 Environmental Leadership Award Honoree Karenna Gore is a climate activist, author, professor, and the founder and executive director of the Center for Earth Ethics at Union Theological Seminary. Karenna formed CEE in 2015 to address the moral and spiritual dimensions of the climate crisis. Working at the intersection of faith, ethics, and ecology, she guides the Center's public programs, educational initiatives, and movement-building.

Gore's upcoming book, *The Circle and the Sphere,* describes a future for the design practices that work within the living and intelligent design of Earth. Based on her viral commencement address to the Harvard University Graduate School of Design's 2024 graduating class, Gore suggests a multidisciplinary Earth-centered approach could not only be beneficial to design thinking but integral to it. "It is not Earth that needs fixing," she said. "It is us."

"Now is the time for us to draw deeply from our faith and wisdom traditions to build a counterforce to protect life on Earth." – Karenna Gore

thrive | SMITH NATURE SYMPOSIUM

Meet the Smith Nature Symposium Chairs



Honorary Chair, Amy Heinrich serves as Trustee of the Harold M. and Adeline S. Morrison Family Foundation (MFF), which is committed to equitable access to the outdoors, focusing on Lake County, Il and Western NC. Through the Nature Everywhere campaign MFF seeks to restore green and blue spaces for the reciprocal healing relationship between humans and the earth. She is also on the Lake County Community Foundation Board, helping to advance their mission of economic justice, community ownership and rapid community crisis response. Amy just retired from over forty years in the ordained Presbyterian (USA) ministry, leaving her most recent post at First Presbyterian, Libertyville. She has found inspiration and grounding for her earth care work through the dedicated scholarship of our esteemed Smith honoree, Karenna Gore. Amy feels called to inter spiritual work that bend lines into circles as we find the joyful impact of tending to our sacred planet in precarity. Amy is a part of her alma mater, Union Theological Seminary, NY's New Dreams for America forum—a highly diverse group of luminaries embracing collective imagination for a more sustainable, equitable, just and compassionate world. She regards the Brushwood community as fellow pilgrims and partners in this critical work of dreaming our way forward.



Chair, Elizabeth Pruett serves as a Trustee of the Butler Family Foundation and is committed to education, health, art, nature, and spirituality. She has held leadership positions in various organizations and serves on boards within the Chicago area. Elizabeth is passionate about empowering underserved communities through education and helping others benefit from the beauty of nature, art and spirituality. She pursues the belief that the health of humanity is inextricably linked to that of our Earth, and feels Brushwood Center is a key player in using nature to heal, educate and flourish in life.

Thank You to our 2026 Sponsors

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Adeline S. Morrison, Shelby and Elizabeth Pruett, The Butler Family Foundation

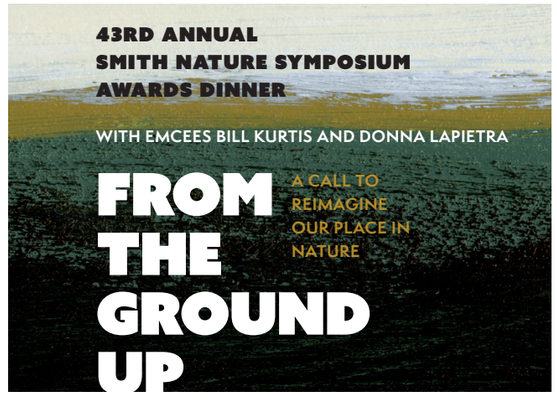
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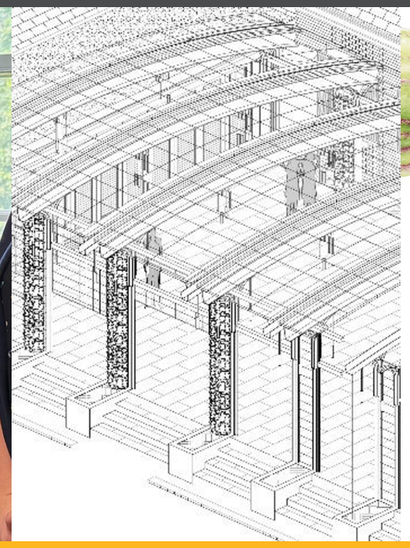


SATURDAY, OCTOBER 10, 2026
5:30 PM - 9:00 PM
CHICAGO BOTANIC GARDEN
1000 Lake Cook Rd, Glencoe, IL

Special Thanks to Our Sponsors and Host Committee

Purchase tickets now







Maternal Environmental Health Training Launches

Did you know that extreme heat events can increase risk of pregnancy complications by up to 25%? Environmental factors play a big role in human health, especially during pregnancy. This summer, 14 Community Health Workers (CHWs) participated in a new training created by Brushwood Center in partnership with Rosalind Franklin University and the Illinois Public Health Association.

The CHWs learned about the impact of extreme heat, air pollution, environmental disasters and displacement, and environmental toxins on maternal and infant health. "Every mother is impacted by environmental conditions," says Brushwood Senior Program Director Ashley Cullen-Williams. "By helping them give their children a healthier life, we are making an impact on the future. We put the student in a position to advocate for their patients. We want to empower the mothers through their helpers."

Solar Coming to Brushwood

Thanks to *ACTIVATE: A Campaign for Investment in Community*, Brushwood Center's historic home in Ryerson Woods is getting an update: solar power. The new Maxine M. Hunter Performance Plaza will be built with a photovoltaic roof to generate power for the plaza and supplement the rest of the building.

Solar power is an important tool for improving the health of both the environment and people. Reducing air pollution, water scarcity, and climate change-related damages greatly impacts human health. Protecting natural resources ensures that we have the resources we need for healthy, thriving lives.

"Solar energy is a solution for all that we need to expand in order to end our addiction to fossil fuels, which is accelerating climate change, polluting our world, and threatening our health and existence." Ted Shieh, MD, Illinois Clinicians for Climate Action

Enriching Life Retrospective

A farewell exhibition celebrating the Heeyoung Kim Botanical Art Academy at Brushwood Center

After over a decade of expert instruction and creative community, the Heeyoung Kim Botanical Art Academy at Brushwood Center is concluding with a culminating exhibition this fall, *Enriching Life Retrospective*. Renowned botanical artist and instructor Heeyoung Kim has been a stalwart presence at Brushwood Center, sharing her passion for art and native plants with many inspired students. We will celebrate Heeyoung's immeasurable contributions to the Brushwood Center community at a farewell exhibition featuring Kim and her students.

The exhibition will run September 13 - October 19 (Brushwood Center at Ryerson Woods will be closed on October 10, 12 & 17).

We thank Heeyoung for her many years of collaboration and dedication and wish her the best in her next adventure!

BRUSHWOOD EVENTS

SAVE THE DATE

The 43rd Annual Smith Nature Symposium Awards Dinner, Honoring Karenna Gore
October 10 | Chicago Botanic Garden

SPEAKERS

Powering the Future! Solar Energy at Brushwood
September 19 | 1:30 PM
Brushwood Center at Ryerson Woods

EXHIBITIONS

Enriching Life Retrospective
September 13 – October 19
Brushwood Center at Ryerson Woods

AT EASE: Nature Holds Our Stories
October 7 – 24
Reception: October 24
1:00 PM – 3:00 PM
Carnegie Library, Waukegan

CREATE WITH US

BASE: Create and Sip
September 16, October 14, and November 18
7:00 PM – 9:00 PM

AT EASE: VETERANS AND THE MILITARY COMMUNITY

Watercolor Painting for Women Veterans and Families
September 24, October 22, November 19, and December 17
6:30 PM – 8:00 PM
Virtual

Art Impact Project
September 15, October 20, November 17, and December 15
10:00 AM – 11:30 AM
Mundelein Parks and Recreation Community Center

Paint and Photograph the Prairie
September 12 | 2:30 PM – 7:00 PM
Midewin Tall Grass Prairie

Sound Off! A Women's Art and Wellness Program
September 10, 17, and 24
October 1, 8, 15, 22, and 29
6:00 PM – 8:00 PM

FOREST BATHING

Harvest Full Moon
September 26 | 1 pm – 3 pm
Bowen Park

Hunter Full Moon
October 26 | 3 pm – 5 pm
Ryerson Woods

New Moon
November 8 | 11 am – 1 pm
Bowen Park

Winter Solstice
December 20 | 11 am – 1 pm
Ryerson Woods

NATURE BOOK CLUB

September 26, October 31, and November 21
10am–11:30am

Visit BRUSHWOODCENTER.ORG to register.



WANT TO GET INVOLVED?

Brushwood Center has opportunities for people of all ages, backgrounds, and skill-levels to get involved in helping us deliver high-quality programming to communities in Lake County.
Email info@brushwoodcenter.org.

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SATURDAY: 10AM–3PM
and by appointment

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The Angelica Sturm Luminary Award

Brushwood Center is pleased to announce the creation of *The Angelica Sturm Luminary Award*, an annual award presented at Brushwood's Smith Nature Symposium to honor individuals who demonstrate exceptional generosity and commitment to the health of our communities, the arts, and nature. The Luminary Award is named in honor of Brushwood's Board Chair, Angelica (Gail) Sturm, recognizing her 12 years of transformative leadership and service to Brushwood's community.

"The greatest success is not what you accumulate. It is what you contribute... Do not wait to arrive at life someday in the future. Too many people postpone joy, purpose, love, creativity, and presence for some distant moment that never fully comes. Life is happening now." – Gail Sturm

This inaugural year, The Angelica Sturm Luminary Award will be bestowed on Bill Kurtis and Donna LaPietra at the Smith Nature Symposium on October 10, 2026. Bill and Donna have been integral supporters of nature and the arts across Chicagoland communities and beyond, serving as Advisors to Brushwood Center as well as generous and compassionate supporters of Brushwood's work. While Bill is best known as a legendary journalist, broadcaster, and writer, and Donna as a creative producer and civic leader, both are passionate voices for the arts and the environment working with partners throughout our communities. They are the founders of the Kurtis Conservation Foundation, and have worked since 1990 to restore native ecosystems at their home, Mettawa Manor, in Libertyville, Illinois.

Bill and Donna have been steadfast champions of Brushwood Center's mission. We are delighted to honor them as the inaugural recipients of The Angelica Sturm Luminary Award.



Gail Sturm with Donna LaPietra and Bill Kurtis at the 2019 Smith Nature Symposium Awards Dinner.

OUR VISION

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

OUR MISSION

Brushwood Center works collaboratively with community partners, 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.

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Your next issue of
thrive has arrived!



IMAGE: WATTELLE | *INVINCIBLE PHYTONCIDES*

AT EASE: NATURE HOLDS OUR STORIES

ART EXHIBITION OCTOBER 7-24 | CLOSING RECEPTION OCTOBER 24 / 1-3PM

LOCATION: THE CARNEGIE LIBRARY, 1 N. SHERIDAN ROAD, WAUKEGAN, ILLINOIS 60085

At Ease: Art and Nature for Veterans and the Military Community, is one of Brushwood Center's four key initiatives, offering programs for Veterans, Service Members and their families designed to empower their wellbeing through nature-based art, music, and photography workshops.

The only program in the region offering a nature-based approach, At Ease helps build skills in creative expression and provides Veterans with access to mental health support. Please join us for a closing reception to celebrate the artists and the exhibition.