



## 2021 ACS Humanitarian Awards **Community Ecology Institute** *Community Impact Award (small nonprofit)*

The Community Ecology Institute (CEI), through its signature programs - Columbia Families in Nature, Roots and Wings Learning Center, and the Community Ecology Center - seeks to foster socially and ecologically healthy communities by enhancing the connections between all people and the natural world. Columbia Families in Nature, founded in 2014, is focused on enhancing participants connection with nature, environmental awareness and action, and family and community relationships. Since 2018, Roots & Wings has provided an outdoor learning opportunity where kids can connect with nature and apply math, biology, physical education, problem solving, reading comprehension, etc. The Community Ecology Center, located on a 6.4-acre organic farm which was purchased in 2019 in the Freetown area of eastern Howard County, is a place for people to learn through direct experience about how they can have happier, healthier, more connected and more sustainable lives.

Since its inception in 2014, CEI has positively impacted the lives of thousands of Howard County families, connecting children with nature and bringing families closer together through shared outdoor learning and activities.

In 2019 Columbia Families in Nature (CFIN) held 54 free outdoor weekend events for families at more than 33 different locations, bringing their impact since 2014 to 271 events with 3,031 families participating, reaching a total of 8,996 children and adults. In 2019 alone, CFIN removed 660+ pounds of trash from local streams, planted 525+ native plants in eight new gardens, created an additional 8 pollinator and rain gardens, and led participants on two weekend camping trips.

Roots & Wings launched in 2018 and operated as a two day a week supplemental education program for homeschooled elementary aged students. In the 2018-2019 program, twenty families were served by Roots & Wings. By the fall of 2019 the program grew to four days a week, serves 45 families, and operates partially from the farm.

Since purchasing the farm in June 2019, CEI has been working diligently to begin stewarding the rapidly evolving Community Ecology Center. Actions to date include:

- 350+ pounds of produce were donated to Grassroots Crisis Intervention Center.
- 125+ trees have been planted on the farm, most courtesy of the Howard Hughes Corporation.
- Greenhouse was restored with the support of Brian England of BA Auto.
- Farm stand has been renovated by girl scout Elise Varoli and family. Many more scouting projects are planned for the spring.

- Atholton High School students have been volunteering twice a week. Their projects have included building compost bins, creating a permaculture berm, and preparing garden beds.
- The Leadership Howard County high school cohort had a team of eight students that did their environmental project on the farm.
- Howard County Public School System students are doing independent studies projects on the farm focused on climate action and have created a Climate Victory Garden.

Work has also begun to renovate the unique post and beam barn on the property, which is slated to become the permanent home of CEI and of the Roots and Wings Learning Community.

Columbia Families in Nature was founded by Dr. Chiara D'Amore in 2014 as part of her doctoral dissertation research. Not content to let the program end when her research was complete, Dr. D'Amore continued to grow the organization through innovative programming for babies and toddlers, elementary age children, and internships for older children who wished to continue in the program while contributing in new ways. As the program matured, CEI sought new ways to serve the community including offering group enrichment opportunities in a nature school environment for home schooled children, while continuing to search for a permanent home.

In 2018 CEI was invited to purchase an organic farm in a history-rich area of Columbia. Located behind Atholton High School and near the Middle Patuxent River, this farm was owned by Mr. David Shaw for almost 40 years. Partially wooded, crisscrossed by seasonal streams, and with a long history of organic agricultural use, the property seemed ideal for CEI, and yet also financially out of reach for such a young, volunteer-based organization. Through the dedicated work of the CEI's Board of Directors, spearheaded by Dr. D'Amore's passion for environmental education and stewardship, and the creativity and resourcefulness of many in the community, funds were raised for the purchase of the property, and the Community Ecology Center has become a reality.

CEI enjoys broad support from the non-profit community in Howard County and across the region. CEI was supported by a Leadership Howard County Premier team from the fall of 2018 through June of 2019 to develop a strategy that would allow CEI to purchase the farm and permanently protect it from housing development. With strong community support, including more than \$90K in grants from The Columbia Association, Patapsco Heritage Greenway, and the Chesapeake Bay Trust; a bridge loan from The Conservation Fund, and more than \$150K from 500+ individual donors, CEI purchased the farm in June 2019.

Current partners include Transition Howard County, Grassroots Crisis Intervention Center, area Girl Scouts, a Leadership Howard County high school cohort, Atholton High School, and a team of more than 100 volunteers.