




wild idea

Richard Louv wants to bring the great outdoors back to life

by Steven Hill

Photograph by Steve Puppe

A photograph of Richard Louv, a man with glasses and a blue shirt, sitting on a wooden fence in a field. He is smiling and has his arms crossed. The background shows a grassy field and a blue sky with clouds.

The night the Kansas Union burned, April 20, 1970, Richard Louv recruited his buddies for a rescue mission. Louv, j'71, was editor of the 1970 Jayhawker yearbook, and his office was on the bottom floor of the union. “We ran into the union as it was burning,” he recalls. “There’s water coming through the ceiling, electrical wires hanging down and we’re running through three inches of water. But we got the stuff out.”

“The stuff” was a yearbook that Louv calls “a little different than ones that came before.” It was a product of the times: Bombs, molotov cocktails and gunshots erupted that spring on campus and in town. Racial violence flared at Lawrence High School. The governor set a citywide curfew and put the National Guard on standby. College students across the nation were protesting the Vietnam War in growing numbers, and four students were killed and nine wounded by Ohio National Guard troops during a Kent State University demonstration in May. Death would touch KU in July, as two young men—former student Rick Dowdell and student Nick Rice—were fatally shot during police responses to local incidents.

Louv was determined the Jayhawker would reflect that turmoil. “A Separate Peace, A Separate Battle” documents the social unrest of the day while preserving Jayhawker traditions like Hilltoppers, a photo spread featuring star students and their accomplishments—albeit with a snarky cheek that rattled a few cages. One photograph of a Hilltopper (“an obsequious term designating the chosen Oread elite,” the yearbook defined it) shows a benignly smiling student body vice president in a familiar casual pose. Only on closer examination is it clear what he’s leaning on—a detonator box, plunger extended, wires leading into Fraser Hall.

1970 JAYHAWKER YEARBOOK



Richard Louv, Editor

“Some people in western Kansas didn’t like it, because it was pretty radical for the time,” Louv says. “But I figured that’s what a journalist does, reflect the times. And those were pretty wild times.”

Today Louv is the widely known author of eight books and a spokesman for a burgeoning movement to reconnect people with the natural world. His 2005 book, *Last Child in the Woods*, warned about the diminishing role of nature and free play in children’s lives, and it coined a new term—“nature deficit disorder”—that gained traction as an apt label for kids’ tendency to spend too much time indoors, focused on video games, computers and TV. The book became a New York Times best-seller and earned Louv the prestigious Audubon Medal. (Recipients include President Jimmy Carter, Rachel Carson and E.O. Wilson.) The National Audubon Society praised Louv “for sounding the alarm about the health and societal costs of children’s isolation from the natural world—and for sparking a growing movement to remedy the problem.”

Wild times: Under Louv’s editorial direction, the 1970 yearbook chronicled one of KU’s most tumultuous years with a verve and directness that still seem fresh today.

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Louv has since co-founded the Children and Nature Network, which supports and encourages people and groups working to reconnect children with nature. Earlier this year he published a follow-up book, *The Nature Principle*, which calls for a renewed engagement with nature in all facets of human life, for adults as well as children.

Louv balks at the notion that he created a movement, but it’s clear *Last Child in the Woods* struck a chord with parents who

worry that children experience much different childhoods than they themselves enjoyed—and that many of the changes are not for the better.

“I never claimed the book started anything; it accelerated what a few people were doing into a lot of people,” he says. “I’m not entirely comfortable with being the leader of something, or an evangelist.” Yet when he discusses his inspiration for writing the *The Nature Principle*, Louv brings up Martin Luther King.

“He said any movement, any culture will fail if it cannot paint a picture of a world that people will want to go to,” says Louv, who feels the environmental movement has failed at that task. *The Nature Principle*, he says, “is my attempt to paint that picture.”

Louv visited Lawrence in October to address the Built Environment and the Outdoors Summit. Sponsored by state agencies and community groups across Kansas, the annual conference brings together an array of people whose work shapes the built environment or, in one way or another, copes with the consequences of the manmade world.

As Louv addressed architects and



STEVE PUPPE

Louv greeted old friends and new during an October visit that included events at the Dole Institute of Politics and the Lawrence Arts Center.

developers, city administrators and urban planners, utility directors, health and nutrition professionals, parks and recreation workers, trail advocates and others who filled the Lawrence Arts Center auditorium, he tried to sketch a future in which nature and technology are more in balance, where leaders consider the potential value of a natural world protected and integrated into everyday life with the same rigor that they consider jobs, economic growth and other demands of the marketplace.

Later, Louv told of giving a similar speech to a far tougher crowd of 200 middle-school students. He expected gum-smacking and boredom. He received rapt attention and thoughtful questions. A teacher explained why: It was the first time anyone had given them hope about the environment. Their whole lives they'd heard about global warming and greenhouse gases and the message they'd absorbed was blunt: game over.

"It's almost a fashion statement to be stylishly cynical, and it's been a long time since an idealistic vision of the future was socially legal," Louv says of his attempt to focus on solutions that—once again—reflect the times. "To have such an outrageously idealistic image of the future is, in a way, a radical act."

Louv grew up outside Kansas City, on both sides of the state line.

He lived in Raytown, Mo., where tract homes bordered countryside. "I could go out my back door, across the yard, through a hedge and into a cornfield where my underground fort was, into woods and fields that seemed to go on forever. I owned those woods. Those were *my* woods."

So strong was that sense of ownership, Louv says, he still goes there today—even though bulldozers long ago cleared his woods for development, despite the 8-year-old Louv's penchant for pulling out survey stakes when he could.

"They existed in my heart then as much as in reality, and they still exist in my heart today. When I go there now I find some-

thing I don't find anywhere else."

To form a bond with nature, Louv believes, kids need two things: Special people and special places. Those woods were his special place. Too many children today, he thinks, don't have that. Childhood is scheduled like a day at the office. Kids don't play; they have play dates—or soccer games, book clubs and other activities organized and overseen by adults. Increasingly, the activities take place indoors, at the end of an electrical cord. A 2010 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation determined that 8- to 18-year-olds spend seven-and-a-half hours per day on average absorbed in media, mostly delivered via screens. In 2007 the National Wildlife Federation launched an initiative called the Green Hour, encouraging parents to give their kids at least one hour a day of unstructured outdoor play; the average, according to a 2004 study by University of Michigan researchers, is less than an hour a week.

Kids don't get the time or parental permission they once had to roam and explore and connect with nature on their own. And people who don't connect with nature as kids, Louv believes, likely won't fight for it as adults. Perhaps more important, they won't have the deep-rooted sense of belonging, what Louv calls "the sense of being someone somewhere" that can be a sustaining force throughout life. "The real question for me," he says, "is if the trends away from nature continue, will future generations of children have that place in their heart to go?"

When Louv was in sixth grade, his family moved to Lake Quivira, where he wrote a monthly fishing column for the Quivira News—his entrée into journalism and the first of several columns in his writing life. In winter he trekked across the ice-covered lake to deliver his copy. "The little old lady who published

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the paper would sit by the fire and read it," Louv says. "And she'd laugh, which made me feel good."

At the William Allen White School of Journalism and Mass Communications, Louv absorbed a tradition of community journalism under several outstanding professors, he said during a reception at the Dole Institute of Politics sponsored by the journalism school, the KU Biodiversity Institute, the Lawrence Chamber of Commerce and Outside for A Better Inside, a local group dedicated to reconnecting kids with the outdoors.

Among his favorites were Calder Pickett and John Bremner. He frequently butted

a concern many of us have had for many, many years,” says Cheryl Charles, who for two decades directed Project Wild, a popular wildlife-focused conservation education program for K-12 teachers and students. “And at the same time it awakened an awareness in people who haven’t thought about it, but who look around and see all these extraordinary changes that have transformed childhood in the last 30 years.”

Charles was planning a national conference on childhood in 2005 when she read Louv’s book and invited him to the conference. He pitched the idea of a new nonprofit group to reconnect children and the outdoors, and with the help of several other partners they co-founded the Children and Nature Network (CN&N) in 2006. Charles is president and CEO and Louv is chairman emeritus.

“I truly believe that Richard is a visionary,” Charles says. “His leadership style is that he prefers to put ideas out there and tell stories about people who are trying to create a better world. But if you think of a movement as people in many parts of the world, individuals with a felt concern, suddenly coming together with a shared vision and a sense of community around an issue—I certainly think it’s fair to say that he’s been instrumental in creating that with the children and nature movement.”

About the same time Charles discovered Louv’s book, Lawrence real estate developer John McGrew picked up a copy and was transfixed. “What the book really did for me was validate concerns I’ve had for a long time,” says McGrew, b’60, whose childhood home was on Indiana Street in Lawrence, just a couple of blocks from the Kansas River.

“I grew up thinking I was Huck Finn. I spent a lot of time on the river, and it’s almost like a living thing to me. It kept me connected and grounded in ways that are important, and I wanted that same feeling for my kids and grandkids.”

Already convinced that kids are too enamored with the great indoors, McGrew found in Louv’s book confirmation that the problem had become serious, with research studies showing intriguing links

between the exposure to nature and enhanced mental and physical health.

He bought several dozen copies and handed them out to city commissioners, school board members and civic groups.

Louv’s message inspired McGrew to do something, and CN&N’s guidance helped him found “Outside for a Better Inside.” The Lawrence group sponsors a family nature club (which organizes nature outings for groups of families), plants butterfly gardens at local schools and churches, and hosts kite-flying and other outdoor events. The group’s name embraces a central tenet of Louv’s books, that nature is a tonic, an essential element to our mental and physical health. Toward that end, McGrew is working to encourage The Bert Nash Community Mental Health Center to incorporate the power of nature into its treatment regimens by building trails and preserving a pond and woods on a planned campus near Lawrence Memorial Hospital.

This local response to Louv’s call for more Vitamin N is being repeated across the country. CN&N has identified more than 90 regional grassroots campaigns for children and nearly 90 local nature clubs for families that have sprung up, and this year alone it sponsored more than 500 “Let’s Get Outside!” events drawing 100,000 participants in 44 states and Canada.

The trend makes Louv optimistic. In his



speeches, he stresses that the cure for nature deficit disorder must come from individual effort, not government action.

“People like John are the real heroes,” Louv says. “I’m just a cheerleader. There are people who do, and people who write about the people who do. I’m the latter.”

The growth of CN&N numbers is cause for optimism, but there are also constant reminders of the immensity of the task. One occurred in 2008, Louv reports in *The Nature Principle*, when the Oxford Junior Dictionary purged from its pages the definitions of more than 90 common plants and animals to make room for new words.

Gone were acorn, beaver, clover, ivy, dandelion, violet and blackberry.

The new words these natural terms were banished to make room for: MP3 player, voicemail, blog, chatroom and BlackBerry—the phone, not the fruit.

“I’m not against technology,” Louv says. “I love my smart phone. But the equation I suggest in *The Nature Principle* is the more high-tech our lives become, the

more we need nature. Technology isn’t going away; there’s going to be more of it. So there needs to be more and more nature to balance that.”

All of us—kids and adults—need to spend as much time with blackberries as with BlackBerries.

Radical idea, indeed. 🍷