



Less Screen, More Green

Jacksonville-based Winston Family Foundation Takes a Leading Role in Connecting Children with Nature – and Each Other

— By Scott Westcott —

Participants in Nature Rangers Brentwood prepare to plant some basil as part of the after-school programming. (Photo courtesy of Project One Health)

Experiencing and enjoying the 'great outdoors' wasn't on the radar for most children living in the Brentwood neighborhood of Jacksonville, Florida.

Many families in the neighborhood face challenging economic circumstances, with some parents working late and safety concerns top of mind, children often stay indoors after school, where screens become the easiest way to fill the time.

Yet that's starting to change one child at a time thanks to the Winston Family Foundation's robust Project One Health initiative that is focused on children developing healthy digital habits by spending more time outdoors interacting with nature and each other, instead of excessive screen time on phones, computers and video games.

As a Project One Health program, Nature Rangers Brentwood is connecting local youth with the natural world through regular programming that gets them outside to play, tend to gardens, steward trails, and learn more about the animals, insects, plants and trees that exist close to home.

"A lot of these kids viewed the outside world as a scary place," said Joni Alexandre, program manager for Groundwork Jacksonville. "Through this programming they are gaining a better sense of safety in their green spaces so they can have a good time outside and learn something along the way."

Nature Rangers Brentwood is one of four Jacksonville neighborhoods where the Winston Family Foundation invests in place-based programming aimed at getting some of the region's most underserved children back outside in safe, healthy and enriching ways.

The effort has been further energized by integrating with the development of the 30-mile Emerald Trail that will create a walkable loop around Jacksonville's urban core, including the neighborhoods engaged in the project.

The programs are just one way in which the Winston Family Foundation is affirming its leading role in helping children create more authentic and rewarding human relationships and gain a greater understanding and appreciation of the natural world by reducing screen time.

From Birthday Parties to Ground-breaking Research

The seeds of the foundation's approach

were planted in an unlikely place: Several children's birthday parties back in 2019.

It was at those parties where a father noticed a disturbing trend: children at what should be a celebratory social event, were glued to their smartphones, many playing solitary video games instead of with one other.

It's likely a scene that many parents have witnessed with alarm and, perhaps, unsuccessful attempts to pry children from their phones. Yet in this instance, the father was a clinical psychologist and addiction specialist – and also a trustee for the Winston Family Foundation. That provided him the expertise to suspect what he witnessed held serious detrimental consequences -- as well as the potential resources to start doing something about it.

The trustee shared his experiences with his colleagues at Winston, setting the Jacksonville-based Foundation on course for launching Project One Health, guided by the globally recognized One Health framework that advocates for a human health model centering on nurturing the vital connection between people and nature.

Yet, the foundation did not want to tackle the challenge without gaining credible evidence that extended screen time had measurable and physiological impact on users.

"This was before the movie *The Social Dilemma* came out and set off alarm bells that these devices and software were being intentionally designed to be addictive for kids," said Winston Family Foundation CEO Syla Obagi. "So our trustee was ahead of the curve from his observations. And he reviewed all the different research universities out there and found that no university was studying the real physiological changes that happened in the brain."

In response, the foundation went big, committing a \$13 million investment to launch the UNC Chapel Hill Winston National Research Center on Child and Adolescent Brain Development and Technology. One of the first studies from the center was published in *The Journal of the American Medical Association of Pediatrics*, adding credibility to the effort.

"The idea was to create longitudinal studies, including periodic MRIs, to show the problem is real by observing what happens when kids spend more time in front of screens," Obagi said. "The studies have shown a concerning 'rewiring' happen-

ing that is a precursor to emotional, developmental, and attention issues."

A Focus on Human Flourishing

The foundation didn't stop there in adding rigor and depth to their research. The initiative also drew heavily on the work of others mapping the scale of the digital problem.

Citing sociologist Jonathan Haidt's work in "*The Anxious Generation*," Obagi explained how data crunched by Haidt showed an inflection point in 2010—the year the iPhone 4 with the first selfie camera and Instagram came online. That's the same time alarming mental health, physical, and developmental issues for kids began to emerge.

To assure effective design of its Project One Health model, the foundation dedicated time and resources to gather insights from leading experts, including:

- Dr. Howard Frumkin, a senior vice president at Trust for Public Land, where he directs the Land and People Lab that focuses research on the intersection of nature and human health.
- Dr. Erin Largo-Wight, a University of North Florida professor and leader of the Nature & Health Center which was selected as the home of Florida's chapter of the National Nature and Health Alliance, a national network dedicated to advancing research and evidence-based education and community engagement at the intersection of nature and human health.
- Academic researchers at North Carolina State University focused on the intersection of people and the planet.

Having documented the problem, the foundation pivoted toward a comprehensive solution framed around "human flourishing." A key insight was recognizing the vital role of nature and the outdoors in reversing the negative effects of the indoor lifestyle.

That insight was inspired in part by the work of Richard Louv, author of "*Last Child in the Woods*," whose books stress the critical importance of connecting kids to nature, wildlife, and companion animals for growth, development, problem-solving, and resiliency.

The foundation's ideas were further validated by observing the success of a "nature school" in Boone County, Missouri, where every fifth grader spends three weeks a year learning science outdoors.



Volunteers and Groundworks Jacksonville staff work side-by-side with children participating in Nature Rangers Brentwood. (Photo courtesy of Project One Health)

Pushing for a Paradigm Shift

The research and learnings led to Winston executing a two-pronged approach to addressing the issue – a grassroots strategy focused on local on-the-ground programming and a grass tops strategy aimed at catalyzing system change in Jacksonville, and ultimately, beyond.

As a reference point for promoting large-scale societal change related to excessive screen time, Obagi points to the dramatic shifts in policy and societal views toward smoking in the early 2000s.

Armed with research on the harmful effects of secondhand smoke and coordinated public service campaigns, advocates were able to dramatically change public perceptions of smoking that led to reduced smoking and policy changes such as smoking bans in public places.

“We’re trying to push forward a big paradigm shift,” Obagi said. “We want to see a similar trend that happened related to smoking occur with phones, gaming consoles and screen time so that society understands there is a point where it’s too much and it’s harmful and it’s undermining our kids’ health and well-being.”

On the local level, there are signs of progress. A public campaign and a Less Screen. More Green 30-day challenge, inviting families to “spend 30 minutes in nature every day” has resulted in survey feedback showing adults enjoying quality time with their children, and kids reporting that they “feel better” when intentionally managing their phone use.

Meanwhile, the foundation is convening a local advisory group of influential leaders from the public sector, academia, business, and funders to drive systems change.

For instance, the foundation is forging relationships with the parks department to advance improvements at local parks.

Pilot programs are being launched with the school district to demonstrate that outdoor learning environments – even just a reading class under a canopy – lead to better behavior and learning outcomes.

The foundation has also discussed with school leaders traditional discipline practices, such as taking away outdoor recess, which Obagi notes “does the opposite in terms of helping the kids behave better.”

The foundation’s work with local health systems is focused on training for pediatricians, school counselors, and family doctors on digital well-being resources and the therapeutic benefits of nature. This includes promoting “nature prescriptions” and taking therapy outdoors, where studies show better results.

A Fresh Perspective on Bees in Brentwood

Back in Brentwood, leaders are encouraged by the changes they witness working with children at four different schools on a regular basis.

Many of the children involved in Nature Rangers Brentwood signed the 30-day Less Screen. More Green. pledge, and have reduced screen time, replacing it with time outdoors.

One child eagerly reports on the progress of her fast-growing sweet potato vine that she brought home to nurture and grow.

Others, who used to flee at the sight of a bee, now understand that bees do more than sting – they play a vital role as pollinators contributing to the health of the local ecosystem.

“Parents are taking notice as well as they learn more about the programming,” Alexandre said.



Children, volunteers and staff gather for a group shot during an afternoon of planting herbs and vegetables as part of the Nature Rangers Brentwood program. (Photo courtesy of Project One Health)

"One mother said, 'Oh that's why she's been outside on her bike like every day this week!'" Alexandre said. "And so, we're trying to bridge the gap and extend our efforts to the home because we know that the parents are vital to making this work." Alexandre's organization, Groundwork Jacksonville, was created to partner with the city to help the city clean up its urban land and waterways, including creation of the 30-mile Emerald Trail.

"The partnership with the Winston Family Foundation has been a perfect fit to advance both organizations' missions," said Groundwork Jacksonville CEO Kay Ehas.

Ehas cited studies that found that "every dollar spent on trails reduces medical costs by three dollars" as people utilize the trail leading to healthier lifestyles. Findings such as that can make a meaningful difference in neighborhoods that currently have some of the worst health outcomes in the city.

"Getting kids out into nature very much aligns with our work," Ehas said. "The Winston Family Foundation are great partners. I just love their model that is focused on how we're all interconnected – humans, animals, and nature. That's really the core of our model too, so we are very much aligned." ■

In a sentence or two, what was the biggest benefit you experienced from doing the 30-day Less Screen. More Green. Challenge?

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For me, it was just being intentional. Making the conscious effort to be present and stay off my phone to model that for my kids.

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Sampling of feedback from parents and children who took the challenge.

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Improved mental health and less stress.

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I re-learned to look at outside with the excitement of a child.

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I'm normally a positive person but had recently experienced a leaning towards negativity. Reducing exposure to screen messaging/imaging has restored my faith in humanity.

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““

I noticed I was a lot less stressed with school when I spent more time outside and took breaks from technology. I also had more energy and was able to quit drinking energy drinks every day.

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Welcoming Our New Members

The following organizations have joined or reconnected with Philanthropy Southeast since our previous issue. Look for them at our events and programs – and join us in giving them a warm welcome!

The **Nathan Cummings Foundation** is a family foundation based in New York City. In November 2024, NCF finalized its commitment to bring 40 percent of its assets – both financial and non-financial – to support racial, economic, and environmental solutions across the U.S. South. Rey Ramsey is the president and CEO.

The **High Point Community Foundation**, based in High Point, North Carolina, directs its giving locally toward health, human services, arts and culture, education, community development, youth, and voluntarism. Paul Lessard is the foundation's president.

The **Louisiana Policy Institute for Children** is a grantmaking public charity based in New Orleans. Its statewide giving is focused on early childhood care and education. Libbie Sonnier is the organization's executive director.

The **Heron Foundation**, an independent foundation, is moving its operations to Birmingham, Alabama, as it directs more of its work toward supporting Southern communities. Felecia Lucky is the foundation's president and CEO.