

June 3, 2019

**2019 Celebration of Children in Nature Award Winners**

*Westcave Outdoor Discovery Center Honors Champions of Children in Nature*

*Austin— June 3, 2019* — Westcave Outdoor Discovery Center is hosting the 12<sup>th</sup> Annual Celebration of Children in Nature Awards Dinner & Presentation on the evening of Sunday, September 8, 2019 at Pecan Springs Ranch in Austin, TX. Westcave will honor two outstanding individuals and an organization that represent innovative and successful regional initiatives to get kids in Central Texas out into nature.

The term “nature deficit disorder” refers to the growing concern that childhood in America has largely moved indoors. Today, kids are spending, on average, 12 hours per day in front of multimedia screens and less than 10 minutes each day outside playing and learning in nature. This shift in how we spend our time has serious consequences for the emotional, mental, physical and cognitive health of children. Westcave Outdoor Discovery Center is working to change that through its support for the Children in Nature Collaborative of Austin (CiNCA).

**2019 Award Recipients**

**John F. Ahrns Award for Environmental Education – Kerstin Johansson, City of Austin, Park Ranger Education & Outreach**

Kerstin Johansson was born in Vermont where she has fond memories of catching frogs and exploring the woods with her family. After graduating from college, she has been passionately working for a world that is more sustainable, equitable, and where people are more connected to nature. Locally, Kerstin has been involved with coordinating climate marches and rallies, and organizing her neighbors around wildlife habitat and healthy creek initiatives. She loves bringing people together and connecting over solutions to environmental and social justice issues, and nowhere is that more evident than in her work with the City of Austin’s Park Ranger Cadet Program.

Kerstin has been leading the charge in Park Ranger Cadet Program for over three years. She has transformed this program into a TEKS-aligned outdoor practicum for young adults at Akins High School. This program emphasizes an array of conservation and educational aspects with a special focus on Women in Conservation. By helping to create individualized paths to success, Kerstin has sent off many rising Cadet Leaders to go on to work for the City of Austin, Texas Conservation Corps, The Nature Conservancy and other environmental partners. Just as John Ahrns did for over 35 years, Kerstin is helping raise the next generation of environmental leaders, whose positive impact and momentum will create a more sustainable future that will be felt for many years to come.

**John Covert Watson Award for Vision – Starla Simmons, Clinical Assistant Professor, The University of Texas at Austin**

Starla Simmons, LCSW is a Clinical Assistant Professor and Field Liaison at the UT Steve Hicks School of Social Work and is strongly rooted in social justice and racial equity. She worked in Austin ISD for over 10 years providing a range of direct care services to families, students, and staff. Starla has a passion for supporting the vitality and resilience of communities of color. She is experienced in holistic practices such as eco-therapy, mindfulness and TBRI (Trust-based Relational Intervention). In addition to direct services, she worked as the liaison and coordinator for AISD's school mental health centers, providing consultation and operational support for school-based therapy services at 19 middle and high schools.

Starla has facilitated trainings in Austin for non-profits around the topics of racial equity, social justice, mindfulness, self-care, and eco-therapy. Currently, she is a member of the Texas Ecotherapy Collective and serves as a faculty liaison for the Environmental Justice and Eco-therapy Student Organization at UT. Previously, she served as an Austin leader for the national non-profit Outdoor Afro, which celebrates and inspires Black leadership in nature, and as board chair for Mama Sana Vibrant Woman, a local non-profit that provides pregnancy and birth support to women of color. At home, Starla is Mama Bear to her two children and spirited partner to her husband, Thomas. She loves exploring natural swimming holes, sitting under trees, camping & live music.

### **E. Lee Walker Award for Collaboration – Variety, the Children’s Charity of Texas**

Variety, the Children’s Charity of Texas, provides opportunities for children with special needs to engage in accessible play in the great outdoors and empower through nature and adventure. Through Variety’s Peaceable Kingdom Retreat for Children, an all abilities camp facility, over 7,000 children participate in recreational opportunities through the Environmental Education Program, Weekend Program and Summer Program each year. As a true collaborative force, Variety operates on a partner model which allows for their staff to work alongside qualified medical professionals, social workers, paraprofessionals and parents to ensure each group of campers receive the highest quality experience.

Variety’s collaborative efforts are helping to create a more inclusive world without isolation and stigma for children with special needs and their families. Whether children are attending a day-long field trip or a week-long summer camp at the Peaceable Kingdom, every child’s experience is rooted in the idea that being outdoors cements children’s learning - about themselves, their natural environment, and the world around them – and that everyone deserves to enjoy the benefits of nature.

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Westcave Outdoor Discovery Center

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