

**Opening Remarks of Dana Friedman
Executive Director, The Early Years Institute**

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I ask that we begin our journey together today by going to the place where many of us spent our childhoods – outside.

- We left the house in the morning, and without a cell phone or Facebook. We found some friends and:
 - Built a fort;
 - Played hopscotch – searching for the perfect potty;
 - Played tag and king of the mountain;
 - We rode bikes to our friends’ houses – wearing baseball caps, not helmets - arriving unannounced, without a blackberry-scheduled playdate.
 - Jay Leno commented on his childhood: we spent hours building co-carts out of scraps and rode them downhill, only to find we forgot the brakes. After a few crashes, we learned to fix the problem.
 - We ate worms and mud pies made from dirt - and we didn’t die. We reveled in a world that ee cummings called “a world that is mud-ilicious and puddle wonderful.”
 - We fell out trees, got cut and ran home so Mom could spray on that stingy stuff. After the band aid and kiss saying “all better,” we ran back outside to play with friends.
 - We drank water from hoses, not bottles;
 - We ate cupcakes, white bread, real butter and drank Kool Aid with real white sugar. And we weren’t overweight. Why?
 - Because we were always playing outside.
 - We had free-range childhoods!
- Recapturing childhood is what The Early Years Institute is about – providing the richest learning experiences for children that stimulate all the senses, including a natural sense of wonder. This is what leads to success in school and life.
- Over 90% of a child’s brain develops by age five; yet, over 90% of our education dollars are spent on children over age five.
- We began focusing on improving the quality of child care, pre-k and Head Start programs, and then realized that half the kids under six are not in formal child care programs; they are with parents, grandparents and neighbors. We looked for ways to find them – and concluded that we need to go where they play, where they pray – libraries, museums, churches, schools, pediatricians, stores – and – parks!
- I did some research and found a national and international movement was brewing on the issue of reconnecting children and nature. I raised funds from Rauch Foundation to send a team of five from

Long Island to Nebraska for a conference on children and nature. We learned some lessons that guide our work today:

- Children will not save what they don't love.
 - One reason children don't go outside is that adults don't take them.
 - We have to help parents and teachers overcome fears – stranger danger, Lyme's disease, accidents and liability.
 - We have to start making play spaces as safe as necessary -- not as safe as possible.
 - We also learned – important in these economic times – that nature is not an expensive destination.
- Our team returned, inspired to do many of the things we heard about in Nebraska.
 - We connected with Dimensions Educational Research Foundation which designated LI as a national demonstration site for nature education for young children.
 - Almost exactly two years ago today, we convened 100 people to introduce LINCK and created a 45-person Steering Committee that has guided our work since then.
 - I will let our LINCK director, Celeste Hernandez, tell you more about our efforts.
 - I want to provide you with the context for our deliberations today.

First, it is important to recognize our potential as a region. Always, when friends from out-of-town visit LI, they are surprised by how lush and green our region is. They thought we only had funny accents and strip malls. They don't remember we are the home of Walt Whitman, Teddy Roosevelt, John Philip Sousa and F. Scott Fitzgerald; they are more likely to associate us with Lindsay Lohan, Howard Stern and Joey Buttafuoco.

And yet, we are the nation's first suburb. We are:

- The largest island in the contiguous U.S.
- We have a population greater than 38 states. As an independent nation, we'd rank 95th among the world's largest countries.
- We are 118 miles long and only 12-20 miles wide, with 340 miles of coastline, 52 acres of parks and 150 world class beaches.
- Our two counties make us one of the richest areas in the country – and the most highly taxed.
- We have 981 units of government with 125 school districts.
- It is said "It takes a village to raise a child." I like to say that on LI, it takes an "incorporated village."
- And though Robert Moses helped preserve open space, parkland and wildlife refuges, some of his policies allowed LI to become one of the most segregated regions of the country.
- That is why LINCK and The Early Years Institute are focused on our high-needs communities – to rectify some of the inequities that exist in the availability of suitable outdoor space for children on LI.

These facts underscore the broader mission of LINCK and The Early Years Institute.

- The vision of EYI is for LI to be a national leader of communities that value children. LINCK is about connecting children and nature, but the strategies we pursue are about community building.

- I remember hearing a speaker in Nebraska who came from Ottawa. He had sponsored the “Ugliest Playground Contest, “asking children to nominate their schools. There were lots of entries and one school, with an asphalt parking lot that served as their playground, won the contest. The children were asked what they wanted in their playground, and they all said “a tree.” This was a downtown, urban area with nary a blade of grass or tree for blocks. The pictures of the transformation were extraordinary, but most impressive was their efforts to involve the community. They asked residents to donate old sneakers. They filled hundreds of donated sneakers with dirt and flower seeds and tied them to the rusting chain link fence that surrounded the school property. Magically, they had created a magnificent flowering wall in which the whole community took pride.

And that is what we are here to do today. And judging from the turnout today, we have achieved some success.

The audience represents the full breadth and diversity of LI communities:

- About a third of attendees represent all levels of the education community - schools, early childhood education, including child care, pre-k and Head Start, and youth programs, after-school programs and higher education.
- Another third represent the environmental community –parks and preserves, land trusts, environmental advocacy groups, outdoor educators and tree companies and nurseries.
- Finally, a third of the audience includes people from libraries, museums, social service agencies such as the JCC and YMCA, government agencies, health organizations and foundations.

We were amazed that so many organizations sent 5, 6 and even 10 people. Special recognition is deserved by the Manhasset Head Start program which closed its center so that all staff could attend. In Patchogue-Medford, the Superintendent requested that at least one representative from each school attend. We were truly touched by the calls we received from so many enthusiastic registrants.

Our sponsors also represent the diversity of our community:

- **Foundations** – Rauch Foundation which has supported us from the very beginning and Pritchard Charitable Trust which has give us three years of funding for all LINCK activities.
- **Land use** – North Shore Land Alliance
- **Large Corporations** – CA, which hosted our dinner with Richard Louv and provided the conference bags; and Lakeshore which as donated so many of the creative touches you see in the ballroom and throughout the hotel. Their staff are working hard all day and Kevin Carnes, President of Lakeshore has been an enormous supporter – and model, for they too have an outdoor classroom for their employees in the middle of an urban warehouse district.

- **Small business** – Haven on Earth, Main Street Nursery, O’Kula Tree Care, and Island Diversified demonstrated their commitment with funds we hadn’t expected from such small organizations.

To all of our sponsors: We can’t thank you enough for your faith and investment -- both of which are lacking in today’s economic environment – but as we hope you see today – is well worth it – and will return enormous returns.

Let me also take this moment to also thank the staff of EYI – particularly as we headed down the home stretch. This team of five people did whatever it took to get the job done.

And our conference committee members – whom Celeste will thank personally – also represent the diversity of our community. They are a true inspiration – and I must personally thank every one of them for bringing real joy – as well as creativity and friendships – to our efforts.

I’d like to close by demonstrating how important our collective work is to achieving our goals – you know –those modest goals of saving the planet and recapturing childhood.

Hold the recycled sheet of paper at your table. Look at it and imagine that this paper represents nature, with all of its beauty and perfection. Imagine a forest full of trees with beautiful flowers and ground vegetation with leaves of different shapes and shades of green that exhale a variety of fragrances. They reveal colorful fruits desired by a series of birds of exotic colors singing out like angels. In this forest, there is also a river of clear and flowing water. Due to its transparency, we can see a number of fish as if playing with life, swimming continuously, forming tenuous circles that disappear on the surface.

Now raise your sheet of paper and wave it in the air. [Loud noise.] When nature is alive, it produces sounds, movements and perfume.

Now crumple the paper into a ball. When we hurt nature, when we pollute it, when we take away its animals, taking their skins and their feathers, when we take trees, plants and flowers away, when we exploit the environment in an unsustainable way... we leave marks.

Now, unfold the paper and shake it in the air again. [Very little noise.] These marks on nature do not simply go away.

We cannot allow our natural environment to be like this. Working together, along with our children, we can certainly make a better world for all living beings.

(Presented by Dr. Angelo Andretto of Brazil at the World Forum on Nature Education for Children, 2007.)

Thank you for coming and we hope you enjoy your day.