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Earth angels

These five innovators are doing good deeds at home and far away.

By Elizabeth Gehrman

The Playground Maverick *Mav Pardee creates natural spaces that children love to explore.* As Mav Pardee was growing up, every family vacation involved the outdoors. Hiking and camping, crossing streams and gathering wood for the fire, she says, “give you a kind of courage and make you more comfortable with your own physical abilities.”

Now that she’s director of the Children’s Investment Fund, a Boston-based nonprofit that provides funding and guidance to help early childhood and after-school facilities create high-quality spaces, the 62-year-old Pardee is making sure local children can have the same kind of experiences. She’s bringing the campground to them in the form of natural playgrounds filled with trees, hills, rock, sand, and water features.

“Children who play in a natural environment as opposed to a traditional playground play longer,” says the Concord resident. “They move more, and they carry on imaginative sagas from day to day, so the play is richer. They make up games and use their imagination. They develop better motor coordination, and research shows natural environments also help reduce stress.”

The natural playground movement started a few years ago and is quickly picking up steam nationwide. The four examples funded and built by CIF – all of which reused as many materials from the site as possible – are the first of their kind in the Boston area, but Pardee hopes they won’t be the last. “These playgrounds give kids a lifelong connection to the natural world that some of them would not have,” she says. “Unless you know nature and love nature, you don’t worry about it.” * * *



Mav Pardee (left) creates natural spaces for children. She is one of five featured innovators who are doing good deeds at home and far away.