



FALL 2025 NEWSLETTER  
2024 ANNUAL REPORT

# BRIDGES TO THE FUTURE

*People and Partners Connecting Through  
Conservation*

# SAFEGUARDING FORESTS AND DRINKING WATER IN BEDFORD

**When our neighbors turn on the tap, they rely on clean drinking water from places like the Muscoot Reservoir in Bedford.**

This simple act connects communities to generations before them, and to the children who will inherit this special place. WLT and the Town of Bedford partnered to protect forestland along the Muscoot Reservoir, ensuring clean drinking water, healthier forests, and wildlife habitat will be here long into the future.

The newly protected land sits within one of the region's largest remaining unbroken forests. With its mature hardwood trees, steep slopes, and scenic views, the property is a vital link in a landscape stewarded by the NYC Department of Environmental Protection. Without protection, development would have brought homes, septic systems, and driveways that could have threatened the reservoir's water quality and disrupted sensitive ecosystems.

"We have a long legacy of working with the Town of Bedford to protect our shared natural resources," said WLT President Kara Whelan. "We're proud to uphold our community's commitment to conservation



and appreciate the Town stepping up with us to champion this important project."

The protection of this land means that future generations will enjoy clean drinking water, while the wider community gains a healthier forest that supports wildlife, sequesters carbon, and softens the effects of climate change.

## Partnerships Make It Happen

The project was funded in part by a competitive \$1.35M Water Quality Improvement Project (WQIP) grant that WLT was awarded through the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, with a 25% match provided by the Town of Bedford's Open Space Acquisition Fund.



**YOUR SUPPORT IN ACTION: YOU'VE HELPED US CONSERVE MORE THAN 9,300 ACRES OF LAND, INCLUDING MORE THAN 1,650 ACRES RIGHT IN BEDFORD!**

**(Above) Signage at 13.4 acres of land protected forever along the Muscoot Reservoir in Bedford. Photo by Gentian Falstrom**



**Aerial view of land protected along the Muscoot Reservoir in Bedford. Photo by Ben Kleist**

*This summer, two conservation apprentices joined WLT to gain hands-on experience and explore pathways to conservation careers.*

*Gertrude Phiri (right) explores the relationship between people and the land, focusing on the powerful call to care for the natural systems that give us so much in return.*

*And on the following page, Jake Sacket reflects on what he learned in the field, introducing the tools that our stewardship team uses to care for our preserves and protect land for future generations.*

**In Malawi, the land becomes part of your DNA. It clings to your feet, your food, your childhood games. It's not something you visit—it's something you live. But conservation? That is a word we didn't use and don't use much today.**

Here in the U.S., conservation looks very different. I found myself in Westchester County, surrounded by trails that don't just preserve land but welcome people in. Trails with signs that say "Welcome," not "Keep Out." Farms where compost is queen and even the worms feel respected.

But sometimes, walking through a place like Westchester Wilderness Walk/Zofnass Family Preserve, I get a knot in my throat. I think of Ntcheu, my parents' village in Malawi, where we used to visit grandma. We'd play under trees so tall they seemed to scrape the sky. These were acres and acres of land, just green spaces. I remember goats chasing us (or we chased them), and cousins laughing with mouths full of maize.

But slowly, those trees vanished. Cut down for fields. Or homes. One by one, our shade, our



Photo by Jake Sacket

## FROM A VILLAGE GIRL IN NTCHEU TO WESTCHESTER'S TRAILS: A JOURNEY ROOTED IN LAND, CULTURE, AND CONSERVATION

*By Gertrude Phiri*

stories, disappeared. Back then, I didn't question it. But now, I do. I see the quiet injustice. Not just the loss of trees, but of memories, of breath, of belonging.

Working at Westchester Land Trust, I've seen what conservation can look like when it centers on people. I've seen worms that hustle harder than city traffic, kale that grows faster than Wi-Fi back home, and volunteers who make land feel like a hug. This isn't just saving nature—it's inviting everyone to the party.

So here I am, a village girl from Ntcheu, standing in New York soil, learning to care, to question, and to grow. And on behalf of the trees, the compost, the groundhogs, and maybe one rogue goat, "Zikomo kwambiri (thank you very much) Westchester Land Trust." Thank you for letting me be part of something so beautifully rooted.

*Gertrude is currently pursuing a master's degree in environmental science and policy at Pace University.*



### LEARN ABOUT OUR APPRENTICES:

MEET PAST YOUTH CONSERVATIONISTS AT [bit.ly/WLTapprenticeships](https://bit.ly/WLTapprenticeships).



Photo by Gertrude Phiri

**In the half-wild sprawl of Westchester County, where cul-de-sacs give way to quiet trails and expansive woodlands, thousands of acres lie under the care of Westchester Land Trust. Each preserve is its own world, with quirks, rhythms, and a delicate balance of life. You don't tame land like this. You learn from it. And sometimes, you give it a helping hand.**

On one thick summer morning, air heavy with dew and expectation, we met Ben (preserve manager) and Stella (conservation technician) at the forest's edge. Veterans of the land, they arrived with a pickup truck full of tools. They introduced us to the brush saw, the forestry saw, the hand clippers, the beastly brush hog, and the most sacred of all: the chainsaw. These weren't just tools. They were symbols of stewardship. Each had a purpose, and each warranted deep respect.

The hand clippers and forestry saw? Perfect for neutralizing mugwort or bittersweet during a monitoring hike. In those moments when you spot an invasive vine outcompeting a native oak for space, sunlight, and nutrients, you act.

The brush saw was a shapeshifter, with attachments like the weed whip for delicate stalks, a circular blade for mature phragmites, and the tri-blade when the undergrowth bites back. The brush hog was raw force, used when fields became overgrown with invasive plants entirely. And then there was the chainsaw, called upon only when trees had fallen or posed a danger. Its roar echoed through the forest like an incantation.

Each of these tools plays a role in restoring balance. Invasive vegetation, when left unchecked, can disrupt the ancient harmony of these ecosystems. Native plants, those that evolved here over millennia, are more than just scenery. They are resilient allies in a time of climate upheaval, offering unmatched ecological support to pollinators, wildlife, and soil health.

**So we cut. We clip. We reseed and replant. We come back weeks later to kneel beside a fragile shoot, hoping. This is land stewardship: a cycle of labor, patience, and hope.**



**HELP OUR STEWARDSHIP TEAM: VISIT [bit.ly/WLTstewardship](http://bit.ly/WLTstewardship) FOR OUR WISHLIST.**

# ANNUAL REPORT 2024

TOGETHER, WE RESTORED FORESTS, PROTECTED OPEN SPACE, AND NOURISHED OUR NEIGHBORS

**Nature thrives when people care—and in 2024, you cared deeply.**

Because of your support, more land is protected, more families have access to fresh food, and more trees will grow strong for decades to come. Your dedication ensures the places we love today will remain healthy and vibrant tomorrow. Thank you for standing with the land, and us.

## PROTECTING LAND

*You helped us protect land for you and your families to enjoy today, tomorrow, and for the future—these special places are safeguarded thanks to you.*



**40** acres of land protected forever in Cortlandt, increasing WLT's McGregor Pond Preserve to nearly 112 acres  
*(More than 50 bird species live here)*

**45** acres of land protected forever in Bedford designated as a known area for rare animals and plants

**29** communities where WLT has protected land



## SUPPORT, REVENUE, AND EXPENSES

### Support and Revenue

Individual Donations	\$515,862
Foundation Donations	\$568,035
Corporate and Government Donations	\$241,321
Special Events, net of expenses	\$325,878
Endowment Donations	\$46,011
Endowment Investment Income, net	\$828,830
Miscellaneous	\$103,767

### Total Support and Revenue

<b>\$2,629,704</b>
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### Expenses

Program Services	\$1,409,831
Fundraising	\$195,919
Management + Administration	\$313,569
<b>Total Expenses</b>	<b>\$1,919,319</b>
Change in Net Assets	\$710,385
Net Assets, beginning of year	\$25,434,119
<b>Net Assets, end of year*</b>	<b>\$26,144,504</b>

\*Net Assets include land held for conservation, Sugar Hill Farm assets, endowment funds, and other Board designated and restricted funds. Please visit our website or contact us for a copy of our audited financial statements for the year ended December 31, 2024.

# CARING FOR NATURE



**700** trees planted across WLT preserves

**12** structures demolished to restore climate resilient land at Little Pond Preserve (pictured on cover)

**1** new preserve opened for you to explore (Mill River Preserve)



**249**

WLT-protected properties monitored by stewardship staff



**5,588** pounds of water hauled to trees during drought



**1** Prioleau Gateway to Glenwood Lake Park dedicated in New Rochelle



**84,550**

servings of fresh food donated since Sugar Hill Farm was founded in 2012

**5,323**

servings of fresh food grown in 2024 and donated to families in Katonah and Mount Vernon  
(That's 1,065 pounds of veggies)



## FEEDING FAMILIES

*At our Sugar Hill Farm food pantry garden, we grow veggies, teach sustainable agricultural practices, and connect people to our local food systems*

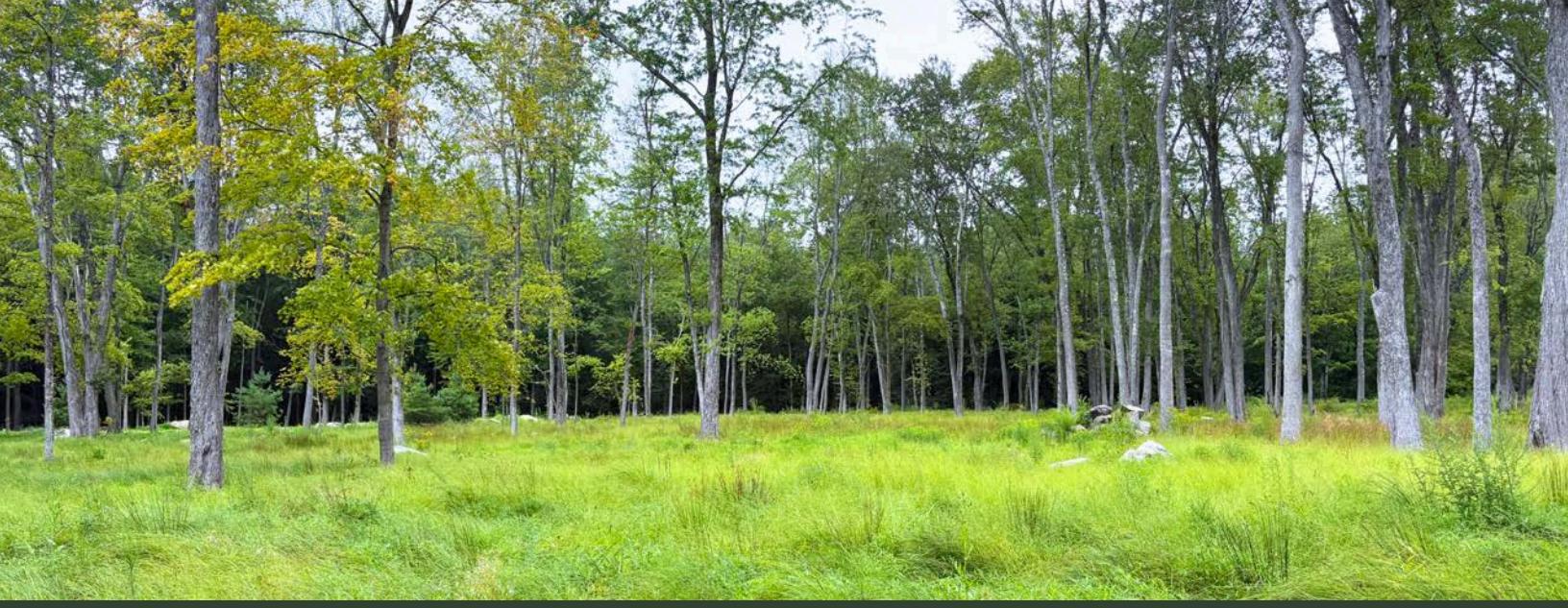
## LEAVE A LEGACY OF CONSERVATION

For decades, Westchester Land Trust has worked to protect forests, streams, farmland, and trails—the open spaces that sustain us all. Planned gifts of any size create a lasting legacy, safeguarding land, water, and wildlife far into the future.

If you've already made this powerful commitment, please let us know so we can thank you personally. If you are considering this step, we would be glad to talk with you about the difference your legacy can make.



**LEARN MORE:** Contact Kara Whelan at [kara@westchesterlandtrust.org](mailto:kara@westchesterlandtrust.org) to start planning your legacy.



# FROM THICKETS TO THRIVING

## CARING FOR LAND BEYOND PROTECTION

(Above) Land being restored by Julia Burke. Photo by Jes Parker



When Julia Burke moved to her North Salem property seven years ago, she was met with a wall of barberry as tall as her shoulders, vines pulling trees to the ground, and impenetrable trails she couldn't even walk her dogs through.

Her land had already been permanently protected by a conservation easement through Westchester Land Trust and the previous owners. But Julia wanted to go further. She saw the potential to restore the land for herself, her horses, and the community of riders who use the trails.

### Renewal After the Storm

In 2019, a tornado brought down dozens of trees, damaging her barn and leaving the landscape bare. Julia turned the setback into an opportunity.

She began planting native trees—dogwoods, oaks, tulip trees, and wetland species—and has already planted nearly 80, with dozens more planned this fall.

"I think the best advice is: every time a tree comes down, plant a new one," she said. "It's so easy to do. I wish I had started sooner—those trees would already be thirty feet tall by now."



(Left) Julia Burke with her family, horse, and dogs. Photos by Julia Burke

## Transforming the Landscape

Today, Julia's land looks completely different. Native meadows and trails have replaced dense thickets. Riders once again enjoy shaded paths, while her retired horses, Goliath and Jones, graze under new plantings. Wildlife has returned, too. Small mammals and pollinators thrive in the brush piles and native flowers she's added.

Her work is inspiring neighbors to take action as well. "Wildlife doesn't care about property lines," Julia said. "But if everyone does even a little, everybody benefits."

**"You can't make more open land—it's going away," she said. "That's why protecting it matters so much. We're so lucky to have open space like this. If all of it looked like this, it would be just amazing."**

Julia's story is a reminder that conservation doesn't end with an easement—it's a living, ongoing commitment that restores land, connects neighbors, and keeps open space thriving for generations to come.

**Learn how you can get started at [bit.ly/WLTstewardship](http://bit.ly/WLTstewardship).**

Photo by Westchester Land Trust



## CONSERVATION EASEMENT CORNER

### *Easement Evening*

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 13 | 5-7 PM

Calling all original and successor conservation easement landowners (and those curious about easements)! Join us for an intimate and informal event hosted by WLT.

Get to know other conservation easement landowners and WLT staff. Full details to follow.

### Questions?

If you already own land under an easement, contact [jody@westchesterlandtrust.org](mailto:jody@westchesterlandtrust.org) and for new easements, contact [janelle@westchesterlandtrust.org](mailto:janelle@westchesterlandtrust.org).



**MORE TO COME SOON:**  
STAY TUNED FOR EXCITING RESTORATION PROJECTS AT TOM BURKE PRESERVE IN THE COMING MONTHS.

## Continuing a Family Legacy

This work is also personal. Julia's late husband, Tom Burke, died in the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center. Following that tragic event, neighbors rallied to create WLT's Tom Burke Preserve in Bedford (left) in his honor. Julia's stewardship continues that legacy, showing that conservation easements are not just about protection, but about active care.

# BUILDING BRIDGES

## THE PATH TO CONSERVATION CAREERS AT OTTER CREEK PRESERVE



This is the fifth year WLT and the Green Team have collaborated to care for our preserves.  
Photo by Westchester Land Trust

**This summer, Westchester Land Trust welcomed our partners from Groundwork Hudson Valley's Green Team for a hands-on project at our Otter Creek Preserve in Mamaroneck. Together, staff and the Green Team repaired aging bog bridges along the preserve's trails and built new sections to carry visitors safely over wetlands and muddy stretches.**

Otter Creek Preserve, one of the last remaining salt marshes in Westchester County, is a treasured place for birders, families, and nature enthusiasts.

"With help from the Green Team, we were able to improve the trails and ensure this preserve remains a welcoming place for the community," said Ben Kleist, preserve manager.

For the Green Team, the project offered more than just a day outdoors. The high school students worked side-by-side with conservation professionals, learning to use tools, problem-solve in the field, and see firsthand what it takes to maintain and restore public lands and protect sensitive habitat.

Your annual support enables these experiences that give young people a pathway to conservation careers, while sparking a lifelong connection to nature and community service.

*"This work builds skills and confidence our students carry with them long after the summer ends. They gain real experience in environmental stewardship, and they get to see how their efforts directly benefit the community."*

—Raymond Foster,  
Green Team Supervisor

## PRESIDENT'S LETTER

*Westchester Land Trust was recently featured on CNN's Champions for Change special with Erin Burnett.*

*You can watch the full segment at [bit.ly/WLTonCNN](https://bit.ly/WLTonCNN).*



### **As I reflect on CNN's recent feature of Westchester Land Trust and my work here, my heart is full.**

Throughout my career, many people have made space for me in this work, lifting me up and allowing me to shine. One of the greatest lessons I have learned in my leadership roles at WLT is knowing when to make room for others to shine.

Gertie and Jake, WLT's summer apprentices (pages 4 and 5), infused our organization with bright energy, creativity, and a vision for what land protection and stewardship can be.

### **Your support helps us engage with, and empower, new leaders who will care for these special places tomorrow.**

The national (and international!) praise we are receiving in response to the CNN feature is humbling, and it belongs to you, too. Together we are making a difference right here at home and across the region—working to feed our neighbors farm-fresh food, safeguarding drinking water that millions rely on, and ensuring that the special places we

love are here tomorrow for people to explore and find peace in nature.

CNN has cast a bright light on OUR collective efforts, reminding us that the work we do here resonates far beyond our borders. For this special recognition, for your steadfast support, and for all that we are achieving together, I am profoundly grateful.

There is still so much beauty we need to protect. Please make your year-end gift to Westchester Land Trust today.

Thank you!

Kara Whelan  
President

P.S. I'd love to meet you for a walk or cup of tea—please contact me to set a date at [kara@westchesterlandtrust.org](mailto:kara@westchesterlandtrust.org) or 914-234-6992 ext. 12.

**(Above) CNN's Erin Burnett interviewing Kara Whelan at Sugar Hill Farm in Bedford Hills. Photo by CNN**

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## COMING UP...

### LEARN HOW WE'RE IMPROVING

### *Accessibility at Our Preserves*

#### IN OUR SPRING 2026 NEWSLETTER

Everyone deserves safe, enjoyable access to nature. In our next newsletter, we'll share the work we're doing to help visitors make informed choices about planning a visit to one of our preserves.

**YOUR YEAR-END GIFT PROTECTS LAND, FEEDS FAMILIES, AND GROWS THE FORESTS OF OUR FUTURE. MAKE A DIFFERENCE AT [bit.ly/WLTdonate](http://bit.ly/WLTdonate).**

**ON THE COVER:** In 2024, we oversaw our largest ecological restoration project to date.

We de-developed 12 structures and restored land, bringing the 176-acre Little Pond Preserve in Patterson, known for its climate resiliency and connection to premier hiking trails, one step closer to being open for you to enjoy and explore!



**LEARN MORE ABOUT THE DE-DEVELOPMENT PROCESS IN OUR LITTLE POND STORY MAP AT [bit.ly/WLTlittlepond](http://bit.ly/WLTlittlepond).**



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