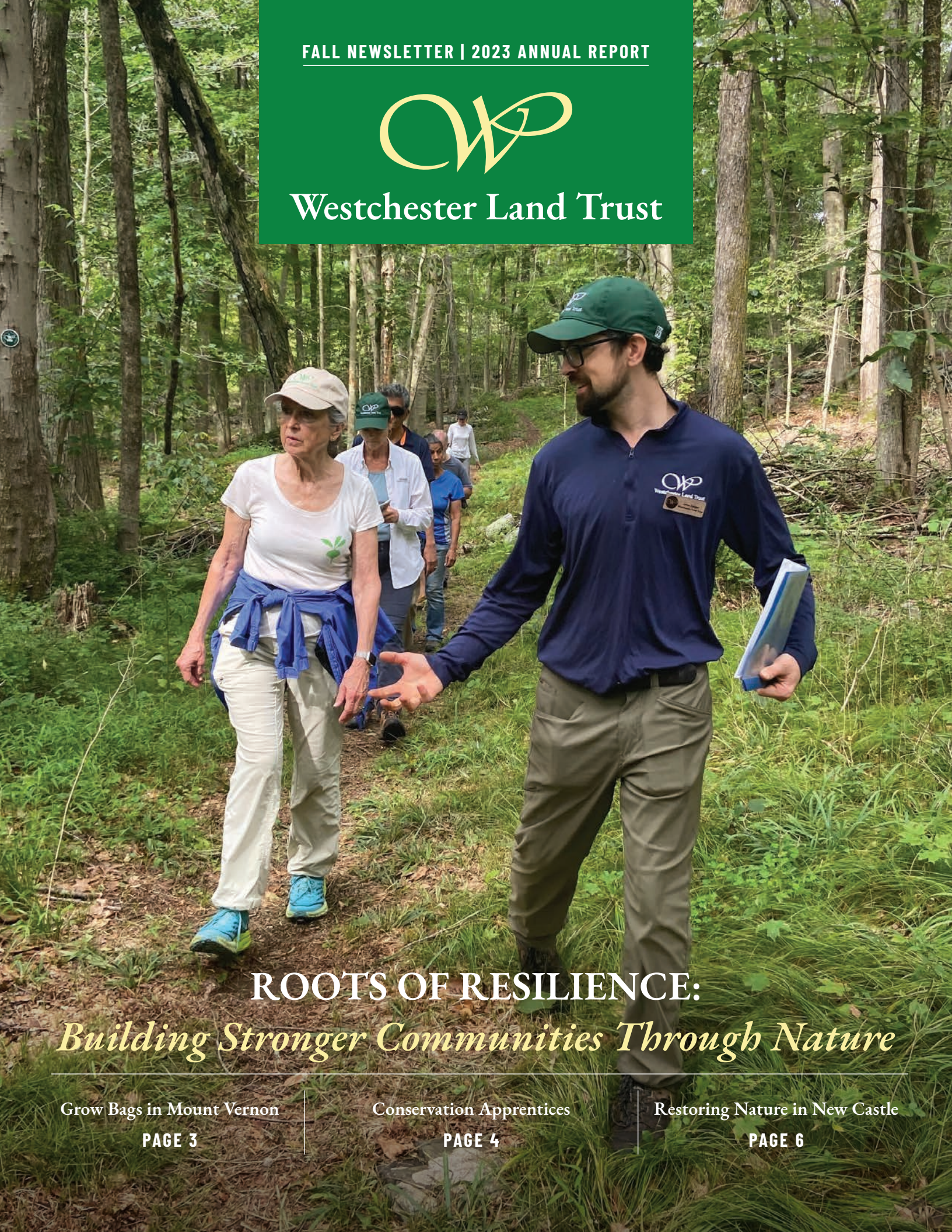


FALL NEWSLETTER | 2023 ANNUAL REPORT



Westchester Land Trust



ROOTS OF RESILIENCE:

Building Stronger Communities Through Nature

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DEAR FRIENDS,

In my first letter to you as president of Westchester Land Trust (WLT) last year, I shared my vision for the future of this organization—not daunted by the challenges we face but emboldened by the love of and for our community to act here and now. Reflecting on the past twelve months, I’m struck by the resilient spirit that I see in our organization, throughout our communities, **and in the actions and generosity of supporters like you.**

Resilience, or the ability to withstand and recover from challenges, is the heartbeat of a thriving, sustainable society. Just as roots anchor trees to stand tall through turbulent winds, the WLT community remains grounded and focused. Together, we are making a difference.

We are eager to share these stories with you that highlight the interconnectedness of humanity and nature. One shining example is our collaboration with the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority. Together, we launched a grow bag giveaway program in Mount Vernon that fostered lasting connections with local groups while putting fresh vegetables in the hands of hundreds of residents. **This program cultivated community, sustenance, and solidarity.**

Our expanded apprenticeship program introduced us to Gigi and Alex, who joined our team this summer. Their boundless enthusiasm for conservation brought great energy to all aspects of WLT. Their stories (pages 4 and 5) encourage us all to nurture spaces where nature and growth intertwine.

Protecting land remains a pillar of our work to build resilient communities. In addition to conserving two parcels in Yonkers, we preserved land in New Castle. See page 6 for an ode to innovative strategies for protecting land that was once disturbed by development.

Your support threads the fabric of resilience and makes our work possible. Together, we are confronting challenges head-on, fortified by solutions that safeguard the peace and wellbeing of us all.

Thank you for walking with us on this inspiring journey. We need you. I encourage you to get involved in any way you can. Together, we can create a world where roots run deep, communities flourish, and nature’s resilience becomes our own.

With gratitude and hope,

Kara Hartigan Whelan



Westchester Land Trust



ABOUT THE COVER

Renee Ring, WLT Board Director, and John Zeiger, WLT preserve manager, walk through the Frederick P. Rose Preserve to assess the ongoing threat of beech leaf disease.

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Westchester Land Trust (WLT) is a member of **EarthShare**, a nationwide network of America’s most respected environmental and conservation charities. To find out how you and your employer can support WLT through an EarthShare workplace giving campaign visit earthshare.org or contact Susan Leighton at susan@westchesterlandtrust.org or 914-234-6992 ext. 23

Combined Federal Campaign (CFC) Number: 77308

GROWING FOR GOOD:

Planting seeds to fight hunger and strengthen community bonds



This spring, Westchester Land Trust gathered in Mount Vernon with local partners, students, and community members to assemble 400 grow bags as part of a new program, 'A Love Letter to Nature,' organized by the Zeta Nu Omega Chapter of Alpha

Kappa Alpha sorority. The bags were distributed at Mount Vernon High School to local families, free of charge, and contained kale, peppers, cucumbers, lettuce, basil, and other plants.



Each bag produced 15–30 pounds of fresh, nutritious veggies.

"Access to nourishing food is a universal need, no matter what our backgrounds may be," said Ruby Olisemeka, WLT's director of urban engagement. "It is our most basic building block that, when fulfilled, unlocks the wealth of potential we all have

within us. Addressing hunger in our communities is a responsibility that we all share, and by giving our knowledge and resources to help people grow their own food, we are attempting to uplift the power that has been taken away by unjust food systems in urban areas."

As part of the program, we worked with partners to host in-person sessions focused on gardening activities, composting, and live cooking demonstrations. Our **Pollinator Pop-Up** also buzzed by the event to teach attendees about the crucial importance of bees, butterflies, and other pollinators for a healthy local food system. Ongoing support was provided to grow bag recipients to ensure their plants grew healthy and produced as many veggies as possible.



 **conEdison**

Thanks to Con Edison for partially funding this Westchester Land Trust program and for supporting local efforts to make our communities more pollinator friendly.



Power in Partnership

The grow bag program was made possible by the dedicated efforts and collaborative spirit of many local partners. We thank the lead organizers at the Zeta Nu Omega Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority for their inspiring vision and thoughtful leadership. We're grateful to the participating groups that joined us to fund, assemble, and distribute grow bags to the community: Bioenergy Devco, Earth Nurture Farms, Federated Conservationists of Westchester County, Inc., Hilltop Farm and Environmental Center, Mount Vernon City School District, and Westchester County Government. Special thanks to Bartlett Arboretum in Stamford, CT for donating seeds, and Highstead Foundation in Redding, CT for their support.

REMOVING TRASH *from* TREASURE



Cleanup at Buttonbush: Gigi, Alex, WLT staffers, and Green Team in the field

At Westchester Land Trust, we're committed to nurturing the next generation of conservationists.

One of the primary ways we do this is through our conservation apprenticeship program, which hires students each summer to join our team and gain valuable career experience. Many of our past apprentices, including Prawravee (Gigi) Pothiwit who joined us this year, are alumni of the Groundwork Hudson Valley Green Team, which employs local teenagers enrolled in the Yonkers Public School system for environmental jobs.

In addition to serving as a pipeline to our apprenticeship program, the Green Team works with WLT to connect students with paid stewardship work on our preserves. This program is generously supported by Lower Hudson PRISM, Rusticus Garden Club, and supporters like you!

By Prawravee (Gigi) Pothiwit, WLT apprentice

Two refrigerators, a blue post office box, an old, torn up couch, and countless used car tires were just a few of the items removed from Westchester Land Trust's Buttonbush Preserve on a scorching hot day this summer in preparation for eventually opening the land to the public. Located in Cortlandt, this preserve is littered with the remnants of its past, as a former sleepaway camp and then an unauthorized dumping site after the camp was abandoned. WLT hired Groundwork Hudson Valley's Green Team, an environmental youth group based in Yonkers, to help with a series of workdays to remove trash from many of the problem areas in the preserve.

The trail network at Buttonbush Preserve is extensive and covers more than 150 acres. Fences are needed to ensure visitors don't end up lost in the preserve. Past ATV and motorbike activity has resulted in the creation of social trails, or unofficial trails that cross through the preserve, which cause confusion and uncertainty for people hiking. The Green Team helped us install fencing, which will create a safer environment that's easy to navigate.

Trailblazing is another technique used to steer visitors in the right direction. With the help of WLT staff, several Green Team employees installed trail markers to establish and clearly mark trails in Buttonbush Preserve.

Despite the blazing sun, swarms of mosquitoes, and long, strenuous hikes, both WLT and the Green Team worked passionately together to help make Buttonbush Preserve a welcoming place for all. While there is still work to be done before it can be opened to the community, the residents of Cortlandt and beyond can expect to have a beautiful new preserve to enjoy when it's completed.



AI ARBORISTS

Training ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE to identify forest disease

Adapted from research by Alex Warren, WLT apprentice

Artificial intelligence, or AI, is quickly creeping into all areas of life, from self-driving cars to bots that can write novels in minutes. While some uses of AI seem *a bit* questionable, this technology presents exciting opportunities for protecting the health of our forests.

Westchester Land Trust's stewardship team is working alongside other organizations to help train AI systems to identify specific tree species from aerial imagery, allowing it to map tree types across entire regions. The maps can then be used to prioritize restoration efforts more strategically and efficiently. For our initial trials, we focused on beech trees because we need better data to know where to target forest restoration efforts in areas affected by beech leaf disease (BLD), an emerging threat that is killing off beech stands in our forests.

A living Beech Tree at WLT



Images generated by an Artificial Intelligence system when prompted to depict a 'healthy beech tree forest.'

How to train your canopy mapping system

- 1 Humans gather characteristics of a given species of tree (in this case, beech), including color, branch structure, canopy shape, and how the trees change across the seasons, as well as habitat data.
- 2 That information is fed to an AI system, which then analyzes aerial imagery for areas that match the characteristics for that species and drops location pins onto a map.
- 3 Humans go out into the field to match the accuracy of the AI map to what trees are present in the forest.
- 4 Characteristic inputs are adjusted based on what data yielded accurate AI mapping results.
- 5 The process is repeated to increase accuracy and identify sources of errors.

While our use of AI for canopy mapping is still in an early stage, the iterative nature of this technology has helped us gather valuable information. As we continue to learn and adjust our methods, AI is poised to be a powerful tool for protecting the health of our forests. **Stay tuned for more on this important work, which is made possible by your support!**



Restoring Nature in New Castle

How de-development created Round Rock Preserve, now protected forever

Earlier this year, Westchester Land Trust permanently protected 11.71 acres at Round Rock Preserve in New Castle through a conservation easement. The path to preservation for this land was not typical—it was slated to be turned into a housing development, with eight lots originally planned. Shovels had already broken ground and a new road and utility infrastructure were installed when New Castle residents Laura and John Desmarais, co-founders and trustees of the nonprofit Kingfisher Philanthropies, began to lose hope that this special place could be saved.

“We could hear the construction noise and the blasting,” Laura Desmarais said. “We were sad, our kids were sad to see the confused animals running through our yard. We could see the upheaval that was being caused by the development work.”

After funding issues halted construction with only one house built, Kingfisher Philanthropies acquired three of the lots that had become available and began the extensive process of de-developing the land to restore wildlife habitat and create a nature sanctuary for the community. “We recognized the importance of these parcels to the larger conservation corridor,” Laura said. “We began work in 2018 and it took some time to prepare for the healing work that needed to be done on the land. We had to fill in construction pits, remove utilities and some of the road, clear construction

What is De-development?

De-development is a burgeoning trend in the conservation world, where properties that have been partially or completely built out with structures are returned to their natural state. In densely built communities typical of Westchester County, this tool is being considered more frequently to restore environmentally sensitive lands that play an important role in the local ecology. In this case, the land that Kingfisher purchased is adjacent to a 48-acre nature sanctuary that had been protected by Westchester Land Trust in 2009.



The best way we can take care of our world is in our own backyards. Maybe we can't all do a lot, but we can all do something.

—Laura Desmarais, Trustee of Kingfisher Philanthropies

debris, establish safe parking and trails, and build bonds with neighbors to ensure we were being mindful of all stakeholders. The final piece of the puzzle was making sure the land would be protected forever by a conservation easement with Westchester Land Trust.”

Today, the land is open to the public as Round Rock Preserve. In addition to placing a conservation easement on the preserve, Kingfisher Philanthropies collaborated with WLT over the past few years to better understand how to manage and care for the land. WLT staff provided advice on de-development and referred the family to a naturalist who conducted flora and fauna surveys to identify what types of habitat restoration to prioritize.

One of the big challenges Laura is navigating at the preserve is removing invasive species that took over when the land was bulldozed during construction.

“Because the land was so severely disturbed, there’s a fair amount of work left for us to do to establish native plantings and welcome back native pollinators,” Laura said.

As the land is returned to a more natural state, wildlife has also returned, with songbirds, deer, coyote, and bear spotted roaming the preserve. And although there’s more work to be done to restore habitats and fight invasive species, Laura feels at peace knowing that no matter what, the land is protected forever.

“A conservation easement is a promise in perpetuity,” she said. “When we’re no longer trustees of Kingfisher Philanthropies and there are new people leading, it’s still a forever promise to our neighbors and a forever promise to the wildlife.”



Longtime WLT volunteer Darielle Rayner pictured in the City of Cuenca in Ecuador

Volunteer Spotlight: *Darielle Rayner*

Darielle Rayner started volunteering at Westchester Land Trust in 2010. She was looking for ways to expand her charitable efforts, which already included donating her time as a trail maintainer for the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference.

Darielle has been a dedicated presence at our Sugar Hill Farm ever since, using her gardening

expertise to grow produce for donation to local food pantries.

“I am an avid gardener, so the same care I give to my own garden I make a point of giving to the WLT garden. As in trail maintenance, the results are well worth any time and effort expended,” Darielle said.

In addition to feeding the community, she sees volunteering as a crucial way for people to build positive relationships. “In an era in which social civility and interaction are rupturing, it is more important than ever that people find a way to connect in person other than via an iPhone or the Internet,” she said. “Volunteering provides an opportunity for people of different ages, ethnicities, and abilities to come together in an environment where criticism, discrimination, and dislike hold no sway. I have always found WLT to be such an environment, and everyone who works there is welcoming, encouraging, and appreciative of volunteers.”

Darielle’s advice to those looking to make a difference through volunteering is to seek out whatever opportunities exist to help better the lives of other people, the life of the land, the life of the climate, or the life of a garden.



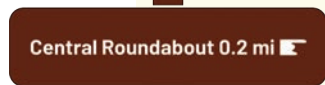
GET INVOLVED!

Learn about volunteer opportunities at westchesterlandtrust.org/get-involved/volunteer.



SUPPORT US

Help us care for the land you love. Make a donation today!



Finding Our Way

Keep your eyes peeled the next time you visit the

Westchester Wilderness Walk Zofnass Family Preserve in Pound Ridge—we’re installing new wayfinding signs! This new signage will help visitors explore the many features and attractions hidden throughout this expansive preserve. And it’s all thanks to people like you. Your support makes preserve improvements like this possible.

ANNUAL REPORT

You Make a Difference

Thank you for your commitment to building a brighter, more sustainable future for us all.

The work we do to protect land, feed our neighbors, and inspire connections to nature is made possible by our generous donors and dedicated volunteers.

To read a list of individuals, businesses, and organizations that made gifts or pledges to WLT in 2022, visit westchesterlandtrust.org.



SUPPORT, REVENUE & EXPENSES *Year Ending December 31, 2022*

Support & Revenue

Individual Donations	\$1,237,044
Foundation Donations	\$357,529
Corporate and Government Donations	\$786,955
Special Events, net of expenses	\$344,117
Endowment Donations	\$11,346
Endowment Investment Income, net	-\$888,820
Miscellaneous	\$9,061

Total Support & Revenue **\$1,857,232**

Expenses

Program Services	\$1,611,777
Fundraising	\$193,974
Management and Administration	\$208,377
Total Expenses	\$2,014,128

Change in Net Assets	-\$156,896
Net Assets, beginning of year	\$24,758,325
Net Assets, end of year*	\$24,601,429

*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, 2022

Westchester Land Trust

403 Harris Road
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Westchester Land Trust

BECOME A SUSTAINING STEWARD

Join our Sustaining Stewards Club by making a recurring monthly donation. Every little bit helps and no gift is too small.

LEND A HAND ON THE LAND

Spend a few hours caring for the land you love. We have volunteer opportunities on our preserves, at Sugar Hill Farm, and in the office.

CONNECT WITH US

Stay up to date on the latest WLT news, events, and volunteer opportunities. You can find us on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn.

SHARE THE LOVE

Nature brings us joy, helps us find peace, and opens up a world of exploration. Introduce a friend or community member to your favorite WLT preserve!

Donate to Make a Difference Today

I would love to contribute \$25 \$50 \$100 \$150 \$200 Other \$ _____

Recurring: Monthly Bi-Monthly

For the price of one lunch a month, you can contribute \$100+ in 2024 and preserve the land that will sustain future generations.

My gift is in honor/memory of _____

I would like my gift to remain anonymous.

I would like to learn more about leaving a legacy gift in my will to WLT.

I will submit matching gift from my employer: _____

Name _____

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*The email provided above will be added to our enews list to keep you up to date on Westchester Land Trust's successes, news, and events. You can unsubscribe at any time. We never share your private information.

Checks made out to Westchester Land Trust can be mailed to 403 Harris Road, Bedford Hills, NY 10507. Donate online by visiting westchesterlandtrust.org and clicking the 'Donate' button.

WLT is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization, your contribution is tax deductible to the fullest extent of the law.

