

Ann Beer.

Merci, Mesdames, Monsieur. I am very grateful for the opportunity to participate this evening.

The L'Anse a l'Orme nature corridor has great value educationally and psychologically for young people. As a teacher with 34 years experience in the Montreal area, I'd like to make clear that I am here today as an individual citizen, not representing any organization, but I do hope to speak about the interests of the thousands of young people I have worked with over the years, and their future. I have taught at high school, college and university level, working with students from grade seven to graduate school. Since 2008, I have taken almost all my College-level English classes to L'Anse a l'Orme for a Field Trip.

Consistently students have spoken or written of the great value of visiting it. Some students in each group tell me that they had never set foot in a natural forest or ecosystem before. Others have visited wild places but know nothing about the cycles of life that occur there each year – and all that these natural processes give back to us, including oxygen, water cleansing and retention, heat reduction in summer, and so much else. On many trips we are accompanied by a volunteer guide, an ornithologist, botanist, ecologist, or expert on local geography -- and each time we learn new facts. The L'Anse-a-l'Orme corridor is an outdoor classroom in the fullest sense and one of great richness for us educationally.

While we usually spend most of our time in the forest section we often walk to the edge of the fields, which allows us to fully witness the life of the birds and other creatures. Hawks, owls, woodpeckers, warblers, sparrows, robins and nuthatches are just some of the birds we have encountered. We have observed chipmunks, squirrels, salamanders, frogs, toads, brown, garter and Eastern milk snakes and deer tracks. Students often say, "It's just like Discovery channel on t.v." which reveals the view of nature they think of as normal – a contact lived only through a computer or television screen indoors.

I believe that working with nature directly is one of the hopes we have for supporting young people, who are currently suffering from acute levels of depression, anxiety and fear about the future, partly because they have been forced into a life disconnected from nature. (Richard Louv has done extensive work on this, and the "Green School" movement.) Many young people are anxious about environmental concerns, climate change, and the technology-driven nature of their lives. My classes are focused on our interactions with the world around us, different cultural relationships with nature, and how these relate to health and healing. Encouraging students to read, write, talk and share ideas about this relationship has had wonderful results – it seems to motivate and move them deeply. Before the Field Trip, only a few seem familiar with the concept of what Japanese culture calls "Shinrin Yoku" or "forest bathing," -- the value of simply walking in a forest or other natural area for mental, physical, emotional and spiritual health. (Selhub and Logan, *Your Brain on Nature*.) When given even the briefest chance

to experience L'Anse a L'Orme, many students are deeply affected. We always stop for a few minutes in silence, to observe and listen to what is around us. This moment is often a centerpiece in the writing the students produce later, and they describe a feeling of bonding with the forest. I've been approached by former students years after the class who say, "Hi, Ann, are you still doing that walk at L'Anse a L'Orme with your students? Don't stop doing that. I've never forgotten that moment when we all went quiet and listened to the trees and the wind or watched the birds in the grass." Some of these students don't have the economic privilege of a country cottage, hiking or vacations off the island; they may have no access to a car; they often come from cultural and socio-economic backgrounds where only the remnants of natural land on the island are available to them.

While some students already know and love the natural world, others show a striking lack of knowledge, through no fault of their own. One student from an inner-city background, who'd never been in a wild area in Canada before, visited on a spring day when the white and red trillium flowers were carpeting the ground. He asked me, quite seriously, who had planted all these flowers, and why. A student from a tropical country kept her hood up through the entire visit, and walked with great care along the path, because she was terrified a deadly poisonous snake would fall into her jacket or bite her ankles. She did not know there are no poisonous snakes in Quebec. Many urban students have been shown poison ivy for the first time on this trip; they neither knew it existed nor knew how to recognize it. An interesting group of

responses have come from final semester science students. When asked, ‘Do you feel you have a relationship with the non-human world, the world of nature?’ one young woman replied, “I have never asked myself this question before. I have never even thought of asking it. I didn’t know it was possible to ask this question.” She was just about to go into science at university. What does it say that the idea of “relationship” with nature was so completely foreign to her? She came and spoke to me repeatedly afterwards, emphasizing that the L’Anse a L’Orme visit had been a transformative moment in her understanding of her own relationship with the world.

Here are some words from students, reflections, poems, or stories. In many cases this may be the first time the student has written about their relationship with the land:

*The adventure in the forest has made me realize that a beautiful woodland exists in the West Island. The trees, the bushes, the creatures and the sounds of nature made me realize that it is not too late, even in the West Island, to solve environmental issues. There is still hope. We can still protect local green space and we can protect the habitat of the animals in the forest. The forest is important to me. It’s a setting in which you can relax and unwind. We can save the forest!*

*The walk was so peaceful and was really worth going on. When I stop to think about how developers want to take the land apart and build on it, it gets me angry. The reason is because of all the trees, the life in this forest,*

*and because it brings peace to my people. I would never be for destroying this land because I have a really strong connection to nature.*

*I enjoyed the trip on Thursday very much. It was lovely to see the gorgeous green all around me. I was fascinated by the salamander and the wood frog especially. I can't understand why anyone would NOT want to preserve all this natural beauty. Too much of it is gone already. People do not often realize how much we actually need it. With the rise in pollution and the decrease in nature, things don't seem to be heading in a good direction. Our entire population may cease to exist if the environment diminishes. It's a scary thought. When I was younger, I visited Trinidad, my mother's country, very often. It was a big change from living in the city of Pierrefonds. We were surrounded by fruit trees and beautiful plants and wonderful pure air. It was very peaceful to wake up in the morning. I would hate for my children not to have this opportunity.*

Finally a short poem, written by a young man as he sat on a log in the forest. "It just came to me," he said.

*This Place in Which I Travel -- AC*

*From the smallest sprouting grass blades to the largest looming tree*

*This place in which I travel now,*

*Life envelops me.*

*Gone are all the things I know*

*The worries and the cares*

*This place in which I travel now*

*Is all that I'm aware (of).*

*The chirping of the youngest jay; the smell of ancient oaks*

*This place in which I travel now*

*Breeds curiosity and hope.*

*Some would call it wilderness and some would call it home*

*But this place in which I travel now*

*For now, is all my own.*

I hope these brief pieces of writing by young people from Montreal island give a glimpse of how they respond to L'Anse a L'Orme. The idea of some of these fields being bulldozed, trees felled, and all of the animals, birds and water systems being disturbed by nearby development makes me very sad on the students' behalf. It sends them a terrible message for their future.

I understand people need to live somewhere, and that there is pressure to encourage families to stay on the island, but I believe we can use other, less precious (because already damaged) brownfield sites for housing. I hope there is some way to save the whole of this ecological jewel on Montreal Island. Mont-real, Mount Royal, the mountain, itself is a valuable comparison. If visionary individuals including Mayor Aldis Bernard, hadn't made the effort to save it, 141 years ago, in 1876, when it opened officially, the Mountain as we enjoy it today, the "green lungs" of the city, would probably be covered with houses, concrete and

asphalt too. (*Source: Les Amis de La Montagne website.*) It is interesting to note how visionary the city of Montreal was at that time. The massive financing needed and the law protecting Mont Royal were apparently the first of their kind in Quebec. So, because of a visionary Mayor and council a century and a half ago, the Mountain is protected for all humans to enjoy and many non-human beings to survive on. Can L'Anse a L'Orme be the green lungs of the Western part of this island? If so, all future children and grandchildren, and generations after them, will thank the City of Montreal and municipal decision makers. They will see them as today's visionaries. And so will all those who do not have a voice in our deliberations, the birds, animals, insects, reptiles, plants, trees and water-courses that we are proposing to disturb or destroy.

I dread telling the young people I work with that this development plan is going ahead, and hope I will never have to do so. Instead I would like to offer them hope for a future that is balanced and healthy and is based on respect for this last large natural space on the island.

I thank you very much for the opportunity to speak here today. Merci beaucoup.