



## Outside In

Wild and precious life in a children's hospital

As an undergraduate biology major and Davidson Outdoors enthusiast, **Katie Vogel '03** was known for keeping it real, in the moment, hands-on, always with a smile as big as, well, all outdoors.

These days, she's bringing the outdoors in, as a nature sciences teacher for kids at Duke Children's Hospital & Health Center and at the UNC Neuroscience Hospital and the N.C. Children's Hospital.

"I'm living my dream," says Katie. Her enthusiasm is the kind that can only flow from a wide open heart through a wide open mind. "The kids are just incredibly inspiring and brave. I go see these kids every day who are sicker than I have ever been, and we get to have fun and be silly and learn about nature."

She often doesn't know a child's exact diagnosis. She doesn't need to. She only needs to reach them where they are, however she can, hospital beds be damned. Once, she placed a seashell in the hand of a child whose eyes were closed somewhere between sleep and pain, as he lay heavily dosed with morphine. The child opened his eyes to see the shell he felt, then reached out to hold a shark's tooth, and soon was explaining to a visitor how a sea urchin's exoskeleton protects it in its natural environment, like that, see?

Another kid had nature brought to life with animal-track molds and an "archaeological" dinosaur dig kit. "Now, he thinks of science as a completely fun,

non-school activity. And he doesn't like school, so that's good," Katie says triumphantly.

Other times, the lesson plan might include a chemistry-set volcano, or Audubon Society toy birds that sing their song when squeezed, even a field trip, for those able, to a nearby pond. There, one day for the first time in a long time, in order to feed a duck, a little girl stood up. Another day, a little boy who had once been withdrawn in his illness came tearing into the classroom to check on his Dixie cup plant experiment, crowing over the new growth of his sunflower sprouts.

And of course, there's that perennial favorite, fake animal scat.

"When I put that on the table in the middle of the bone marrow unit, the nurses go crazy, and the kids love it. I love that, I really do," says Katie, clearly pleased at her good fortune.

This program Katie has created, "Healing and Hope Through Science,"—and through laughter, it should be noted—is part of the Children's Education Department at Sarah P. Duke Gardens. The program is funded with a grant from the Oak Foundation, as well as a Kids Care grant from Children's Miracle Network for programming at Duke Children's Hospital & Health Center. Private donations have rounded out inaugural budgets to serve more than 400 children in the last twelve months, and Katie and the staff at the



gardens are already—and always!—on the lookout for more funding. In the meantime, Katie completely fills her thirty hours a week with work that gives her goose bumps in the retelling.

"I'm hoping it will become a national model," Katie says, with the hope of an idealist and the conviction of a realist who has already followed her heart to dreams come true.

She quotes lines learned in Associate Professor of English Annie Ingram's "Adventures in Literature and Wilderness" class at Davidson. From Theodore Roszak's essay, "Take This Job and Shove It": "All of us have a gift, a calling of our own whose exercise is high delight, even if we must sweat and suffer to meet its demands. That calling reaches out to find a real and useful place in the world... the chance to be in our work with the full force of our personality, mind and body, heart and soul."

And from Mary Oliver's poem "The Summer Day": "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

For Katie, no plan is more wild or more precious than sharing a touch, a knowing smile, a science lesson, or just a flat-out belly laugh with a child.

Indoors or out, it's only natural. ♦

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