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Eleanor Elbers of The Orchard School & Community Center to be Honored as the 2018 Educator of the Year

Walpole, NH (October 12, 2018) - The CCCD is honored to recognize Eleanor Elbers of the Orchard School & Community Center in Alstead, NH as the 2018 Educator of the Year. As one of its founding members, Eleanor embodies the heart and soul of Orchard School & Community Center. Eleanor teaches and organizes Day Camps, the Arts & Ecology Afterschool program, and community festivals throughout the year.

The Orchard School & Community Center was founded in 1991 as a place of inclusion focused on gathering, growing, and learning. Eleanor's story however, began much earlier than that. In 1971, Eleanor found her way to Erewhon Farm in East Alstead where she and 25 novice farmers grew organic food for Erewhon Trading Company in Boston, one of the first organic food distributors in the U.S. They grew vegetables, root crops, all kinds of dry beans, and learned homesteading and farming skills from local farmers. At the root of her work, Eleanor believed that by increasing access to healthy food she could empower the disenfranchised, improve health and build community.

While farming at Erewhon Farm, Eleanor met Anton Elbers, who she later married and started a family with. In 1973 Eleanor and Anton began community farming with others at Steppingstone Farm in Marlow, NH until 1988. Through those years Eleanor found herself drawn to working with and caring for the various children that surrounded her on the farm, including her own three children. Eventually, she began to wonder how she could share this farming knowledge with kids and connect it back to her mission of caring for the children in a way that built self-esteem and self-reliance in a world rapidly forgetting the value of cooperation, creative problem solving and hands on work. Eleanor embarked on this mission with her first childcare at Steppingstone Farm in 1973. The daycare operated out of a shared home and property where 8-14 members lived closely with each other and the land. They grew and sold vegetables and much of their own food, launched the Keene Farmers' Market, sold firewood, and made maple syrup.

During this time Eleanor began to recognize the importance of creating inclusive spaces where all children can grow and learn. This insight was prompted by her own family, the children who came to stay at the farm, and her work with Monadnock Developmental Services (then called New Hope New Horizons). As if she was called to champion this work, Eleanor did just that. As she interacted with her own children and the children and families that attended the daycare, she began to notice that "so many of the children in our life had what later was known as 'learning differences'" and there were things that *everyone* could gain from, regardless of these differences. Things like being in nature, growing your own food, eating and preparing food,

participating in music and art and community work; all these things demonstrated to children that they can succeed no matter their abilities or differences.

Eleanor and her family moved back to East Alstead in 1990. In 1991 she joined with two colleagues and The Orchard School & Community Center was born. The mission was simple; make it accessible and inclusive and focus on the things that translate to everyone. “You need to include everybody” Eleanor says, “whether a child is going to throw dirt in the air or plant, that child is still included here because he/she has some good ideas that we are going to need.” Eleanor believes that we must model for children simple understandings we can all relate to. Ideas like: I don’t know – Let’s see what happens – Here’s what I do know. Andrea Alderman, Homeschool Program Leader at The Orchard School, had this to say about Eleanor: “Eleanor is a loving visionary who maintains constant forward motion on her quest to manifest her dreams of a safe and supportive community for children and their families. Her life's work has been in creating a place that is a safe hold of inclusion, kindness and humanity, where people can put down roots, sing together, and forge lasting friendships.” Eleanor’s focus has always been to create an environment where everyone is welcome, where everyone can live together, be in community, and work things out collectively. This is her foundation as an educator and is the foundation of the Center.

In 1994, the 2,500 square foot building that is now The Orchard School & Community Center was erected thanks to the leadership of Eleanor, Kathy Torrey, and Kathleen Vetter, a team of 12 skilled builders including her husband Anton, and the help of over 275 volunteers who contributed more than 3,000 hours of work. The Center opened to 45 students on September 14, 1994. As you enter the large open space of the Center, you are greeted with a hand-made sign that reads: “Welcome to The Orchard School & Community Center – Our mission is to be an accessible place of learning that nurtures a sense of community, respect for individual differences, the land, lifelong learning, and a connection between the cultural life of our rural community and that of the world beyond.” Since its beginning, The Orchard School & Community Center has hosted over 2,000 children in their pre-school/kindergarten childcare, summer day camps, homeschool programs, and afterschool programs. The children embark on a range of activities that include math projects, growing food and tending animals, participating in festivals and performances, singing songs, exploring nature and everything in between.

The Orchard School & Community Center is a 501(c)3 nonprofit institution that relies on a range of grants and volunteer support to continue its success. Funding sources include the United Way, the Acworth Community Charitable Fund, Alstead & Acworth Conservation Commissions, the Marlow Children’s Fund, the Catalyst Fund, and Monadnock Developmental Services (MDS). Each year 20-30 kids with identified differences and at-risk youth can attend programs at the Center with the help of a grant from MDS. At any given time, at least one third (if not half) of the students enrolled in the programs are kids with differences. That is a huge number for such a rural community – and it doesn’t stop there! Kids keep coming back well after their time in the program has ended, working as counselors in the programs that meant so much to them as students and continuing the cycle of inclusion, community, and connectedness.

Eleanor shared some of her thoughts with us about her work at The Orchard School:

“These days one of the most important pieces educators can share is a sense of wonder for life. If we are lucky, we work in schools that invite the child to walk through a portal on their own. Not away from the real world with all its injustice and sorrow, but close to the heart of hands on situations and projects. I work from a curriculum that strives to find a zone of connection for each member of the group. To feel and to touch life directly inspires the most shut down child. To walk the bridge to twig village requires concentration and balance for the most over active child, to sit still (a practice where each camper finds a place to sit or lie down for a whole 5 minutes in complete quiet) allows for regulation.”

Eleanor would be reluctant to call what she’s doing “environmental education” in the traditional sense of the phrase. Rather, she refers to it as an “ecology of community & compassion.” Eleanor believes that her work as an educator is environmental, but in a unique and different way by not placing the focus on the environment, but on the children in the environment – whatever that environment may be! By focusing on community and connection, she and her students live this “ecology of community & compassion” and thus of environmentalism and conservation. Her teachings highlight realities that everyone can relate to such as: we’re all in this together and many hands make light work. She believes that including kids with differences enriches everyone in the group and changes lives for the better.

We thank Eleanor for the valuable service she provides to the youth in our community and it is with great honor that the CCCD presents Eleanor Elbers with the 2018 Educator of the Year Award. Congratulations Eleanor!

Please join the Conservation District in honoring Eleanor Elbers for her commitment to creating a community of inclusion and access for local youth at the CCCD Annual Meeting on **Wednesday, October 24th at 6pm at the Keene Country Club**. Doors open at 5:30pm for hors d’oeuvres, silent auction, and cash bar. Tickets are \$25 and include cocktail hour with hors d’oeuvres, a buffet dinner, and dessert. Seats are limited - please register early at <https://tinyurl.com/yc8rb7wa>

The Cheshire County Conservation District promotes the conservation and responsible use of our natural and agricultural resources for the people of Cheshire County by providing technical, financial, and educational assistance. Our goal is to encourage the stewardship of healthy soils, productive ecologically sound farms, diverse wildlife, productive sustainable forests, healthy watersheds, and clean water to ensure those resources are available for future generations. Established in 1945, the Conservation District operates out of Walpole, NH where we work alongside the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and other conservation partners. For more information, contact Amanda Littleton at amanda@cheshireconservation.org or 603.756.2988 x116.

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