

# Art + Nature = Activism

**Joanna Dickey '05** uses art to break the education mold.

by Terra Osterling

**Joanna Dickey '05** was on crutches the summer before her junior year at Nazareth College. Recovering from her second ACL surgery had her off the lacrosse field and at home in the Lower Hudson Valley, north of New York City. At the time, Dickey was honing her skills in studio art (her major) and studying psychology (her minor) for a career akin to art therapy, a field that promised an intersection of her loves for art and helping people. The summer job opening at nearby Strawtown Studio, a nature-based art program for children, would prove to be serendipitous.

"The director, Laurie Seeman, hired me to be Strawtown's 'home base' person — to answer parent phone calls and keep materials organized — as I was still immobile," said Dickey. Seeman is an artist, curator, and creative entrepreneur who founded

the non-profit Strawtown Studio in 2002 to reconnect children with nature through art and science exploration.

Every day that summer, the children returned from their woodland and creek-side adventures brimming with excitement. They were sculpting with rocks, sticks, and soils, and working with flowers, leaves, and grasses to create everything from pigments to functional art. Dickey's knee healed enough so that she could join them, and they enthusiastically showed her where they collected skunk cabbage and harvested clay. This immersion in art and nature — where the art medium and studio are nature — tugged at Dickey in a way that camping and hiking experiences had not.

"It opened me up to a different world of viewing nature through an artistic lens,"

Dickey said. "I went home that first week and told my parents, 'This is what I want to do for the rest of my life!'"

Today, Dickey is Strawtown's program director and lead artist/educator, working alongside Seeman to bring transformation through art to children, their families, and the natural environment that is Strawtown's classroom. And that mission is increasingly making a wider impact through the support of funders and grant-makers, most recently the New York State Council on the Arts.

In 2021, Strawtown launched its InHabit Art project — in partnership with two nearby community centers, The Haverstraw Center and the Martin Luther King Multi-Purpose Center — with funding by the National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities New York. InHabit Art guides youth in experiencing the Earth as their home by blending local nature discovery with art while developing empathy for wildlife and learning how art can be a voice for the environment. And the children in the program did what artists often do: They broke molds and flattened the siloes separating disciplines to become both inspired artists and stewards of the land where they are growing, learning, and playing.

Strawtown's breakthroughs include the founding of a community action group committed to promoting environmental awareness, partnerships, and practices that restore and preserve the health of Sparkill Creek, one of the program's outdoor classrooms. It all began when one student noticed an odor emanating from the creek, which inspired the directors to research who was responsible for the waterway, and to take action.

Dickey and Seeman are now expanding their reach by training artists and educators to take this work to more youth and communities. They are also writing a book to help spread the Strawtown Studio teaching method that leads children to a larger world of possibilities.

Videos and more:  
[strawtownstudio.org](https://strawtownstudio.org)

Terra Osterling is a Rochester, New York-based freelance writer. Photos provided by Strawtown Studio.



Viewing nature through an artistic lens: A Strawtown Studio clay art activity staged in the forest invites students to study trees and their forms.



**Joanna Dickey '05** shows students the marvels of plant life near a stream that travels from Hook Mountain at Marydell Center in Nyack, New York, to the Hudson River. In her hand is jewelweed, which shimmers like silver foil when submerged in water. In the background is skunk cabbage, an ancient plant.