



Blackwood
Land
Institute
embraces



Carlos Antonio Rios photos / Chronicle

DOWN TO EARTH

conservation
as way to live
and learn

By **MARTY RACINE**
Houston Chronicle

The land rises imperceptibly, then wrinkles into the getaway countryside near Hempstead, 40 miles outside Houston.

Down a dead end off FM 1736, on 23 acres of integrated delights, the land nourishes and informs. It heals and teaches and deposits a city slicker back on the planet, where he might feel whole again.

This is the Blackwood Land Institute, an outdoor learning environment based on the concept of *Erdkinder* ("earth children"), or the exploration of nature, developed by the Italian doctor and philosopher Maria Montessori. Blackwood is both a classroom for schools and a retreat for adult organizations.

It is, says founder, director and owner Cath Conlon, "a place for the arts, a place for the sciences, a place for the hard and soft to mix."

Conlon, a contractor and educator who lives in Houston, became caretaker of the property 10 years ago, after it had been in her family for about 15 years.

With the help of assistant director Val Laquet and intern Olaf Larsen, she has since designed and built a house and added a barn, a greenhouse, a lily pond, a treehouse, a sweat lodge and vegetable and herb gardens.

She came here after some "medical scares."

"Things were out of balance," she says. "I needed a way where I could reach deep down to those gut strings inside myself that made life more meaningful."

She decided to study permaculture — literally permanent agriculture, but really a way of life. Fusing ecology and ethics, permaculture preaches conservation and sustainability. Aesthetics are a byproduct.

"It's about being more mindful rather than blasting through life without a care in the world," says Conlon, 46. "It means following the natural order."

On the land, it means growing your food, preferably with organic materials; retaining rainwater for irrigation and household needs; building "green" homes out of natural products such as earth or straw bale; and harvesting the sun's energy for power.

But for all its rural applications, permaculture can also be practiced by city dwellers.

Away from the land, it translates into eating regionally and seasonally, recycling, assuming responsibility for one's health, using nontoxic cleaning products and wearing warmer clothes indoors in the winter to reduce heat consumption and stress on the body's immune system.

"We create our own havoc, so it's being wise about your time," Conlon says. "Do you run to the store 10 times a day or do you make a list? With the right planning, 20 percent of your time is for implementing, leaving 80 percent for the important things, like family."

She registered for a permaculture course in Austin in the early '90s, but only a few hippies showed up, and the class was never held. So for three months Conlon committed every other weekend to New Mexico, where the concept of sustainability, she says, is embraced.

Members of the Permaculture Dry Land Institute of Santa Fe, where she studied, write curricula for schools and work with forestry officials and city planners.

She received her permaculture design certification in 1993 from the institute and now teaches permaculture around the country.

She also teaches wilderness survival. Has led an organic-gardening project in

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Above: Jonathan Aldridge, right, and Raye Palmer work in their organic garden. Top right: Cath Conlon, Blackwood Land Institute's founder, director and owner, poses near the main house — a 5,000-square-foot ranch-style commons.



Above: Blackwood Institute teaches conservation and sustainability.

Korney Caldwell, left, Makie McBrayer and Ginger Pardue work on a project.

Top left: Jonathan Aldridge washes his hands at a water-harvesting tank.

built framed-earth structures in Central Africa.

She's a tribeswoman, and I'll tell you of the ways of life," she says. "I find it hard to separate the

In Houston, Condon runs the Blackwood Building. Originally and named from the main residence, it does not contain restaurants. It does not have used alternative materials to build homes in Houston and throughout Texas, Arizona and New Mexico.

Nine years ago, Condon's Episcopal parsonage in Houston, where her son attended, she happened to meet Cally Burgin, whose St. Burgin's Montessori class at St. Stephen's was operating in a makeshift building on a tiny patch of ground. That was the first time she saw the work of the Blackwood Building. She and the other architects, a group of independent-minded architects, met in a restaurant, had in mind

Condon offered her land northwest of the city as a living laboratory. It would be an experiment.

Word spread, six schools, including Ward Middle School, moved from one Texas and Florida — so Blackwood's first year ago — on a regular basis. Some classes come out for a day, others for several days or a week.

Students are taught by their own. Classroom instructors are not employed by Condon and instead, other teachers, brought in, such as the Blackwood Building Group's Larry Van Arsdale.

There are "traditional" classes at Blackwood in Texas history, math, chemistry, reading and English. "I teach, parents," says Robert Williams, who was recently out with School of the Woods, a Houston elementary and middle school.

But, weather permitting, most of the students' time is spent outside. The students' "time is spent outside, where ecology is not a subject but a matter in a pond. At Blackwood students analyze and water systems and learn cultivation, harvesting, wilderness skills and the building of trails and bridges.

"I am being able to walk in the woods," says Laurent "Nico" Nico. "I am being able to walk in the woods," says Laurent "Nico" Nico.

Condon is building a pathway — they call it a "honeycomb" — that winds through the trees, and then they search the internet to find out, the trees grow best in our area.

Condon also likes Blackwood because of the fire tree she has. "It's a big property, so you can walk around for a long time and not even get bored."

Too much is required of the kids to have them in the woods. Condon



Students from School of the Woods, a Houston elementary and middle school, talk about a book they are reading.



Making a new house: food are, from left, Robert Wilkerson III and Christopher Henry, Britany Bowdell, far left, help prepare the soil.

themselves for their friends. They have to take care of their by-gones, their nutritional needs.

Nutrition means getting your hands dirty. "It's our responsibility to teach people where the food comes from, and what they eat," Condon says. "Kids come out here and see carrots growing; they can't wait to pull them up and eat them."

School groups cook for themselves. "This is an opportunity for a total entrepreneur in self-reliance," says Condon.

While school kids have been the primary audience, Condon has upon an idea years ago that would allow her to expand her client base.

At a San Francisco conference of the Blackwood Building Group, she



Cecilia Arango Ross works in the greenhouse at the Blackwood Building near Hightopside while Jeremiah Aldernus waters the seedlings.



Raye Palmer, left, and Jonathan Aldridge assist in the greenhouse at the Blackwood Building near Hightopside while Jeremiah Aldernus waters the seedlings.

"I'm obsessed by the fact that I'm working with the same group of people in the Building Group for 14 years. They're the family. We have worked out systems that have kept the ball rolling."

Condon is dividing an old, grand oak. The treeshouse was built six years ago for the birthday of her son, Cade, and if you let yourself go, you're in a tropical rain forest. The mangoes don't thrive on soil alone.

Condon, who maintains a residence in West University and teaches at Rice University, says she is hooked on Blackwood. "I'm hooked. This results in a lot of sleep in the trees up here. All she needed was an air mattress and a lantern."

In February she finished the main house, where she keeps modest sleeping quarters upstairs. The house is a 5,000-square-foot structure with a large kitchen area, a bathroom, and a bedroom. It's a small, cozy place that fits perfectly into the natural surroundings.

The structure is built of straw bale, an increasingly popular construction technique in the United States, but it's not used everywhere. It's a world. Thick, heavy bales are wrapped tightly in duct tape, and cement is applied to the exterior. They're stacked. This results in a strong, durable wall. The structure is built on a foundation of concrete. It's a simple, functional design that blends with the natural environment.

people will say, "This is my answer, sacred space; this is where I want to build my house." Then (by building) they lose that sacred space. So (instead) you do an overtop. Where does the fire travel, where does the travel, where does the travel, all these and this is the place to build.

"You could build on the highest spot on your property, because you know you're going to make it beautiful. Then you get to keep your sacred spot."

When she looks on the property, it says I think.

"So I rented a tractor from Newco and drove it here. I just showed where there were no trees and left the rest of it as it was.

To minimize impact, Condon constructed the roads using shale for the base, gravel for the sides, and gravel for the top. She's on earth — for erosion control and fire retardant for irrigation. The pond is pumped by a solar panel. The greenhouse is heated by sun-absorbing water stored in 55-gallon drums.

She's building a chicken coop and plans to use the principles of permaculture to help the community. She's learned to use things in multiple ways. So what is it that chickens give us? They give us feathers for pillows, they give us great stories that we laugh at, they give us food — the most as well as the eggs — they give us nitrogen for the lobby space; it's a Blackwood Building Group member.

Long ago, several widows were used by the church to help the poor. They came centers for rides and rituals. "Out of respect, I don't want to mimic an Indian tradition, so it's strictly for personal use and for education," says Condon. "We have great grandmothers who are very wise. It gives them a chance to share their type of structures, and ritual and bonding."

Behind the deer meadow is the labyrinth, or "the road to Jerusalem — 1,000 linear feet of stepping stones that go from 100 to 1000 feet. It's a path that winds through the woods, and it's the path that goes through which elements in nature grow and flow."

It takes about 10 minutes to walk to Jerusalem.

"I just last year, my mind off adults ever if it's there's being in mind of the way to look Condon."

The entrance looks east. Just so you know where you are, says the caretaker.

"The sun rises in the east — people are taught that in schools. But it never occurs where the sun is. There is a great place where the sun is. There is a great place where the sun is. There is a great place where the sun is."

Blackwood more information about the Blackwood Building Group, call 713-765-3422 or e-mail Condon at carcon@blackwood.org.