



2022 ANNUAL REPORT



# NATURE IS





FOR EVERYONE





## FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Thanks to your support we saw amazing success over the past year. We knew continuing our year-to-year growth was vital. Studies show that screen time for youth has not returned to pre-pandemic levels. They're still spending 52% more time on devices than they did in 2019. The biggest increase was reported in youth ages 12-18, the very ages we specialize in (1). Youth are constantly connected, but never connecting. This makes our small group excursions even more important than ever.

To combat this we went into the year wanting to continue our atmospheric growth. Thanks to your support we served 30% more youth than in 2021. These 450 youth were able to experience the wilderness for a total of 6,000 hours outdoors!

We also wanted to grow our newest program, Photo Club. Our youth spend time in nature, soaking in the beauty around them before capturing images with a professional camera. This program has enabled

us to infuse art into the healing power of nature. At their last gallery of 2022 they collectively made eleven hundred dollars from the sale of their work!

In 2022 we also set targets to grow our partnership programs. We were able to partner with several youth-serving organizations. Our largest partnership was with Jersey City Public Schools. We provided an entire month of empowering wilderness adventures during the summer at no cost to the students.

We also launched partnerships programs with corporations like Goldman Sachs. These employee engagement programs provide volunteering opportunities for employees and much needed mentorship for our youth. Employees and youth connect while embarking on wilderness excursions together.

The best part of all of this is how it impacts our youth. They consistently tell us that their time in nature helps them to relax and de-stress while

also giving them the confidence to tackle life's tough challenges. One of our youth, Cinthya, tells her story on the following spread. It is a great example of the kind of impact that is happening thanks to you, our supporters.

We are incredibly grateful for your support and look forward to even more explosive growth in 2023.

Thank you!

**Steve Cunningham**  
*Founder & Executive Director*

(1) Madigan S, Eirich R, et al. "Assessment of Changes in Child and Adolescent Screen Time During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis." *JAMA Pediatr.* 2022.

# FROM OUR BOARD PRESIDENT

One core memory my family and I enjoyed this year with Team Wilderness was visiting one of the Photography Club Gallery events. I was struck by the immense amount of beauty Team Wilderness showed the group through their photography.

With this in mind, I'd like to take an opportunity to remind all of you about the importance of helping our youth experience the beauty of our world not just in their own backyard, but in areas that they have not even gotten to experience yet. Our mission to bridge the Nature Gap and provide equitable access to the outdoors for all has been at the forefront of our work, and I am proud to say that we are making a real difference.

The Nature Gap is a stark reality for many young people in New Jersey, particularly those from marginalized communities. Youth of color in our State are three times more likely to live in areas deprived of nature. They are missing out on the transformative benefits of spending time outdoors – improved self-confidence, enhanced mental health, and better academic performance. Instead, they spend hours indoors,

consumed by screens. Team Wilderness is here to change that narrative. Through our experiential educational model, we are empowering urban teenagers to explore the wonders of nature, develop vital teamwork and leadership skills, and build strong character. By facing physical and social challenges, they learn to adapt, problem-solve, and overcome obstacles, all while discovering their passion for the world they live in.

Thanks to the unwavering support of our donors, we have been able to expand our reach and impact. Over the past year, we have organized numerous wilderness excursions, exposing more and more young people to the beauty and serenity of nature. We have witnessed the transformation in their eyes as they stand on a mountaintop or paddle across a serene lake for the first time. These experiences instill a sense of awe and wonder, planting the seeds of a lifelong connection to the outdoors.

Our commitment to equity is unwavering. We believe that zip code, upbringing, race, or financial resources should never be barriers to experiencing the joys of nature.

Every day, our dedicated staff and volunteers work tirelessly to ensure that urban youth have access to the wilderness. We are breaking down the walls that separate them from the natural world and opening doors to endless possibilities.

On behalf of the entire Team Wilderness family, I want to express my deepest gratitude for your continued belief in our mission. With your support, we will continue to bridge the Nature Gap, nurture tomorrow's leaders, and create a more inclusive and vibrant community.

Thank you for being a champion of nature and a beacon of hope for our youth.

Sincerely,



**Joel Torres, MA, MCHES**  
*Board President*





## TRANSFORMING YOUNG LIVES IN NEW JERSEY

### *By Cinthya, 14:*

Last week I was coming home from school, I wasn't even in the house yet, but I could hear my brothers screaming. I was thinking "How am I supposed to do homework?" You see, I live in a very loud house. I have four siblings that I live with, all of them under the age of six. It is very hard to concentrate or focus on one thing for an extended period of time. School is definitely less chaotic, but it's still very stressful, since I have to focus on my academic work. So, Team Wilderness is my outlet, an escape route.

In the summer of 2021 my stepmom saw a post about Team Wilderness, and asked if I wanted to sign up for a week to go paddling on the Hudson. I thought this might be worth a try. I had never paddled before in my life, and I was terrified. I've been to the city pool but I had never been in an ocean or lake or anything like

the Hudson. We were wearing life jackets, but I was still frightened. We all know the stories about the bodies in the Hudson and now I was on it. Kayaking was tough. When it was windy the current would take us in the wrong direction. The boy I was partnered with was getting frustrated and wasn't always paddling so I felt like I had to do it by myself. We worked on our communication and eventually I was able to get more comfortable and started to have fun.

After having this amazing experience, I wanted to do more, so signed up for Summer Treks, the hiking and camping program. One of the things I liked the most about the hikes was the Ten Minutes of Silence. We took ten minutes on each hike, just to be present and focus on putting one foot in front of the other.

We didn't have anything else to worry about, except being in the present moment. In those moments you start noticing more things. Like on one

trail it was a mile from the ocean and during the moment of silence I noticed there was so much sand on the trail that was still wet from rain the day before. It sounded so different from leaves crackling under our feet on the other hikes. It was a very big difference from my house, where we can hardly hear ourselves think.

Of course, there were challenging adventures. I think the most challenging trip I went on was the first overnight trip, when we went rappelling. This was a whole new terror; To look over the cliff and realize only a couple of ropes were going to hold you while you went down. I can't even remember going down, only the terror beforehand, and the rushing adrenaline afterwards. I was so overwhelmed after going down that I just burst into tears. Immediately, everyone came to my side, to make sure I was okay. I assured everyone that I was fine, I just couldn't contain my emotion. I think that being able to overcome that cliff made me feel

like I could overcome anything in life.

Last fall I signed up for the Photography Club. I wanted to try it out because it seemed so different. It's really unique to learn how to express yourself through your pictures.

Each picture I took on the trail wasn't just a cool photo but a mem-

ory of how I felt. And my most impactful memory from Photo Club was selling a photo I took. I had taken a picture of church doors in the neighborhood because it reminded me of my childhood in Brazil. And then in my first gallery ever a man that grew up in the same neighborhood saw the picture and was so overcome with joy, that he cried. I felt exhilarated to bring so much joy

to someone I didn't even know.

Overall, my house is still loud but Team Wilderness is the safe haven and escape place I have. I will always sign up for everything they have to offer because it is an environment I need to be a part of. All my friends and people my age need this too.

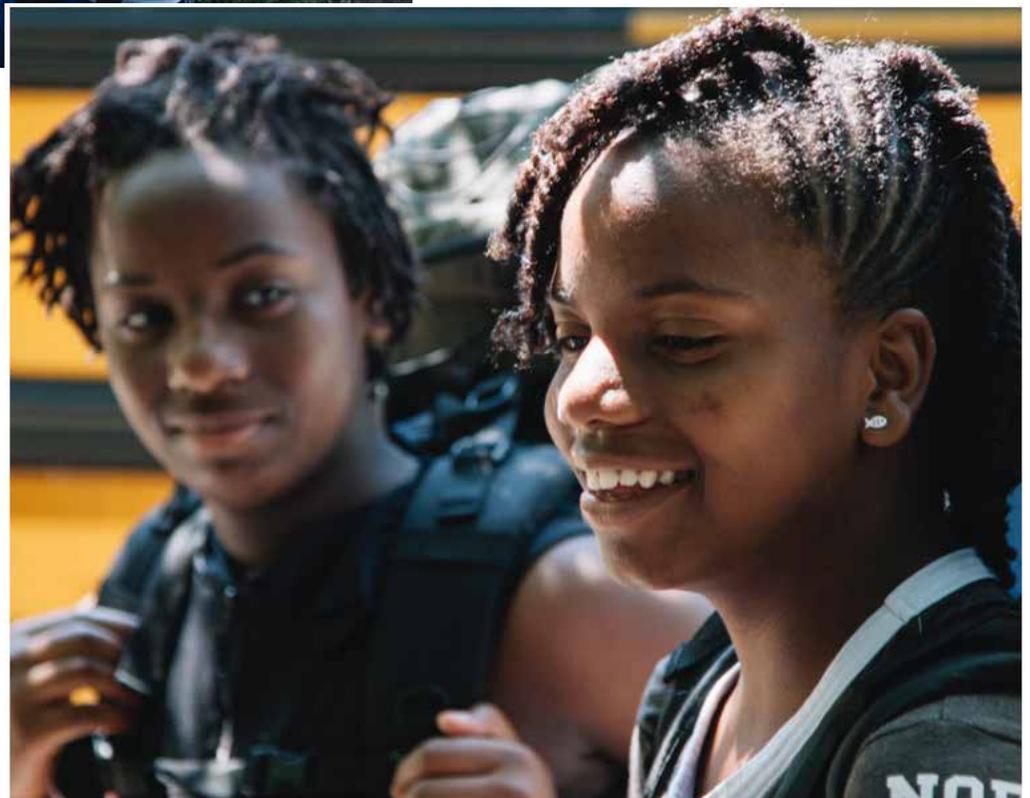


*"I'm not always the most social person around new people. I would have been fine not talking to anyone, but Team Wilderness encouraged me to be more outgoing."*

*Team Wilderness also helped me develop a new appreciation for nature. It made me feel so liberated and alive. It gave me confidence I needed for senior year and the college application process."*

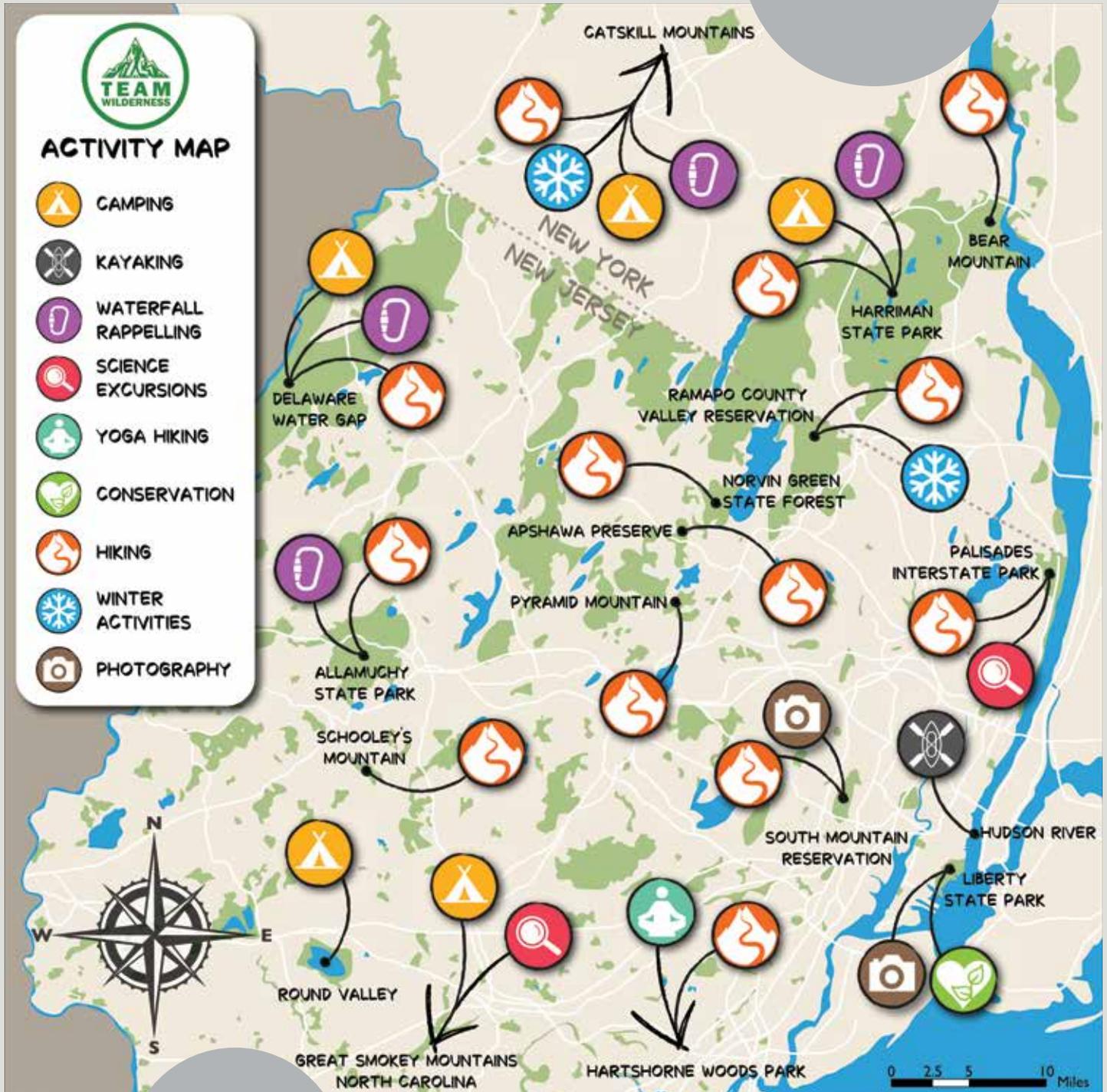
*"Team Wilderness provided an amazing experience for me that I otherwise would not have had. They took our group on hikes, rock scrambling, waterfall repelling, and a yoga hike. I had such a fun time camping and bonding with everyone."*

*People in Jersey City don't generally have the ability to go out into nature, but they provided that for me and it was the best experience of my summer."*



# PROGRAMS

95% of participants reported increased confidence



82% reported being in nature helped reduce their stress

## Photography Club

Photography Club is our after school club that infuses the arts with the wilderness. It includes weekly after-school lessons in photography and monthly trips to discover and capture the wilderness.

Team Wilderness provides digital SLR cameras for students. Once they are familiar in the technical aspects of photography, students partake in several organized trips through the duration of the trimester. These trips are an opportunity to practice nature photography. This will present them with an opportunity to practice taking photographs of wildlife, flowers, and landscapes.

Additionally, youth have the opportunity to display prints of their work in a gallery at the end of each trimester. Youth help plan the gallery to showcase and sell their work, with all profits going directly to the student artist.

## Summer Treks

Our inaugural program encompasses two weeks of empowering outdoor character building adventures during the summer break.

Trips include hiking, a yoga hike, and rappelling. Breakfast and lunch is provided for all youth. Every activity and trip incorporates our E.T.H.I.C.A.L. values (empathy, teamwork, health, inclusivity, community, conquering adversity, and leadership). Each day includes reflection that emphasizes self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision making and personal growth. The session culminates with a three day backpacking trip in the Catskill mountains. Youth unplug and bond while working together to build the campsite.

## Wilderness Club

Our after-school program offers weekly team building, tutoring, mentoring and lessons in nature

photography. This is coupled with monthly adventures in the wilderness.

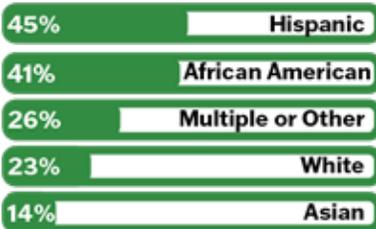
Wilderness Club is managed with support by college students that are alumni of Summer Treks. High school students that are alumni of Summer Treks provided secondary support tutoring.

## Wilderness on the Water

Each summer we partner with Resilience Paddle Sports to offer 'Wilderness on the Water'. These STEM infused adventures teach teens how to kayak and paddle board while playing games on the Hudson River. They also learn about local marine life, how to conduct water quality tests, and climate change's impact on local waterways.

Youth do not need to know how to swim to participate as wearing a personal flotation device is required. About one third of our participants do not know how to swim.

### How Participants Identified



**OVER  
6,000  
HOURS**  
of Outdoors Time

**33% of  
instructors  
are alumni!**

### Free/Reduced Lunch Receptients



# OUR TEAM



*From left to Right:* Arthur Velwest, Andrew Cruz, Heather Darley, Shane Strano, Rasec Ventura, Alaina Hannah, Aracelis Hannah, Yomna Ali, and Zyaire Allen. *Not Pictured:* Breeyanah Gee-Burney, Franklyn Mena, Gelmaris Ri-jaard, Hamis Guirgis, Ke Tenn, Kiara Jorge, Melodee Sampson, Sara Adamu, Steve Cunningham, and Vanessa Reina

## Team-member Spotlight: Vanessa Reina, LSW, Principal Counselor

Two new pilot programs were planned and developed in 2022 for a 2023 launch. The Northstar Project offers mental health support and care management for struggling youth, while the Academic Coaching Program will offer bi-weekly coaching and regular check-ins.

“Many kids are struggling, especially in the wake of COVID. They are struggling to find a sense of community again. Mental health and academic support are not always accessible, especially to low income families in New Jersey. We want to build a program that uplifts these families, and offers an extra layer of support,” explains Vanessa Reina, who will lead both programs.

Vanessa studied communications at Rutgers University and recently completed a Master of Social Work at NYU. Vanessa started at Team Wilderness as a Junior Field Instructor before earning the position of Principal Counselor.

The basis for both programs has emerged in established Team Wilderness programs. While working with the Summer Treks program as an instructor, Vanessa observed that participants naturally began to open up and share more than they would necessarily in a classroom or typical counseling setting. Combining additional, formal support systems with the already beneficial effects of nature was a logical next step.



“Our goal is for youth in the program to feel supported by Team wilderness in a way that assists them in learning how to tackle any mental health themes that come up such as family, relationships, identity or academic based topics. When they are out in nature or on hikes, kids are tapping into really powerful qualities and characteristics. For example, going up a mountain and completing a hike is really in a sense overcoming a challenge. We want to encourage kids to use those same qualities and characteristics they discover in themselves in their daily lives,” Vanessa explains.

Growing up in New Jersey as a first-generation college student

in a Spanish speaking, immigrant household, Vanessa strongly identifies with the demographic of youth that participate in Team Wilderness programs, and has always recognized the effects of nature on mental health.

“Growing up, I was outdoors a lot. When I went through challenges, the outdoors was a safe haven. Having a place where I could go and sit and just be surrounded by trees was healing for me. I always knew I wanted to try to find a way to merge [counseling and nature] together,” Vanessa says.

Thanks to the generosity of donor and grantor support, the new

programs will be a vital resource for local youth.

“Donor support is allowing us to better support the youth that we serve, not only by bringing them to the outdoors, but also by helping us guide them in developing a healthy lifestyle, both physically and mentally,” Vanessa explains.

“That goes beyond just their involvement with Team Wilderness. The kids will take the lessons that they learned with us and be able to use those skills for the rest of their lives. We hope that they will build on what they learn in the program and share their appreciation for the outdoors with others too.”

## BOARD OF DIRECTORS



*From left to Right--Top row:* Trustee: April Vella, District Supervisor of Mathematics, Northern Valley Regional High School District -- Treasurer: Brigid D’Souza, Assistant Professor, Saint Peter’s University -- Vice-President: Juan Melli, Managing Director, Mercury Public Affair -- Trustee: Pamela Johnson Founder & Executive Director, Anti-violence Coalition of Hudson County -- Trustee: Shince Francis, Partner, PwC. **Bottom row:** Trustee: Lilia R. Diaz, PSE&G Payment Assistance Outreach Specialist -- Executive Director: Steve Cunningham, Team Wilderness -- President: Joel Torres, Director of Programs (ADAPT), Family Connections -- Secretary: Lauren Tortorete, Senior Vice-President, Powell Communications -- Not Pictured: Trustee: Indira Kasula, Senior Manager- IT Business Partner at Becton Dickinson -- Trustee: Elvi Guzman, President City Challenge Athletics Foundation

# FINANCIALS



- GRANTS \$80,574
- PARTNERSHIP PROGRAMS \$65,290
- INDIVIDUAL SUPPORT \$59,190
- CORPORATE SUPPORT \$36,343
- EVENTS \$15,832
- TUITION \$12,556

- PROGRAMMING \$236,113
- OPERATING \$32,430
- FUNDRAISING \$9,773



85% of each dollar impacts programming directly.



## PARTNERS

By partnering with local schools and organizations serving students, as well as local businesses, Team Wilderness harnesses the power of local leadership and community to offer unique opportunities for mentorship, personal growth and shared experiences outdoors.

One of the largest partnerships this year was with Jersey City Public Schools. Team Wilderness provided an entire month of empowering wilderness adventures during the summer at no cost to students.

Another partner was Goldman Sachs. Employees joined Team Wilderness for a day hike, with one participant from Goldman Sachs

sharing, “It was a beautiful fall day and you could see that both the students and employees enjoyed going outside and spending time together, getting to know each other in a different setting. While some mentorship conversations can feel ‘forced’, the dialogue as we hiked was incredibly organic and the students didn’t take too long to really open up.”

The trips provide customized employee engagement experiences for corporations that provide volunteer opportunities on corporate-sponsored trips. These experiences allow a group of staff to engage with youth as role models during an empowering day trip. This not only

serves to benefit our youth, but creates a memorable and uplifting experience for volunteers as well. Trips can include hiking, rappelling, or a yoga hike, all of which boost staff-morale and increase camaraderie among staff.

One youth participant of a partner hike shared with us, “We worked together and inspired each other to keep going forward.”

*“Team Wilderness helps Jersey City students grow in many ways, instilling confidence as well as teaching leadership and independence. Leave it to Team Wilderness to take something fun and make it educational. ”*

-Paul Silverman, SILVERMAN Partnership Program Participant



# SUPPORTERS

We are grateful to everyone who donated to Team Wilderness in 2022. Thank you for making a difference in the lives of New Jersey youth.



## ORGANIZATIONS

Amazon  
 Eastern Atlantic Regional Council of Carpenters  
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 Moo New Jersey  
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 The Scandinavian School of Jersey City  
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