

Sustaining Life by Starting Young

by Karla Araujo

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What is your dream for your life and your Island? That's just one of the challenges 40 Vineyarders from ages 16 to 23 will try to answer in a week-long Youth Summit hosted by the Stone Soup Leadership Institute this summer. Offered at no cost to Vineyard youth, the Summit, held from June 26 to July 2 at the Menemsha Inn, will bring together 50 youth delegates from the Vineyard and beyond to share their personal, professional, Island, and planetary goals with a special focus on sustainable living.



According to Marianne Larned, founding director of the institute, the Martha's Vineyard Youth Summit on Sustainable Development offers young people a rare opportunity to pool their ideas and to create action plans they can implement in their own communities. "Through the Summit, we're inviting teenagers and young adults to get involved now and on an ongoing basis," Ms. Larned explains. Thirty year-round Island youth, 10 seasonal residents, and 10 young adults from the Caribbean will participate in the conference.

Founded on the Vineyard in 1997 by Ms. Larned, the Stone Soup Leadership Institute is a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to developing tools, programs, and community initiatives that inspire young people to address the critical issues they face — personally, locally, and globally. While it sounds complex, Ms. Larned's philosophy is based on the simple 16th-century European folk tale, "Stone Soup," in which a hungry traveler boils a stone in water to entice otherwise stingy villagers to contribute to his meal. The moral of the fable, according to Ms. Larned: Magical things can happen when a community comes together.

The Vineyard Youth Summit will be Stone Soup's sixth annual summit for sustainable development. Previous summits have been held on the Caribbean islands of Vieques and Virgin Gorda.

To participate in the Vineyard Youth Summit, young adults between the ages of 16 to 23 can either apply directly to Stone Soup Leadership Institute or they can be nominated by adults in the community. According to Ms. Larned, youth delegates are being nominated by staff at Island schools, churches, and nonprofit organizations like The FARM Institute, the Vineyard Energy Project, and Young Brothers to Men.

Ms. Larned's enthusiasm has won the support of The FARM Institute's Education Director, Sidney Morris. "Nobody gives teens and young adults enough credit," Mr. Morris says. "This population is capable of great energy and accomplishments. They're usually considered a population 'on hold.' The Stone Soup initiative acknowledges their potential. We plan to stay involved on an ongoing basis, mentoring young people in sustainable agriculture right here at home."

Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Nancy Gardella is also an advocate for the forum. While she says the Youth Summit is "out of the purview of the Chamber's usual activities," she has committed to inform Island businesses about Stone Soup's mission. "It's an opportunity to broaden our horizons on the Vineyard," she says. "The Summit will bring fresh ideas to a group of young people from all over the world. I'm impressed by the opportunity to see the forest and not just the trees."

The late Walter Cronkite served as honorary chairman of the Institute's International Advisory Council. Ms. Larned attended his memorial service in New York last August and met his grandson, Walter Cronkite IV. A 21-year-old junior majoring in government at Hamilton College, Mr. Cronkite agreed to co-chair the Vineyard Youth Summit on Sustainable Development as a way to honor his grandfather. A summer Island resident since birth, he was easy to persuade.

"I thought it sounded like a cool, interesting project," Mr. Cronkite says. "I hope it will help inspire young people to accomplish their hopes and dreams as well as to discuss sustainable development in the Vineyard community."

Ms. Larned has poured much of her energy into fostering ties with environmentally-conscious organizations on the Island in recent months. She says she envisions creating long-term partnerships in order to engage Vineyard youth in meaningful, engaged activism.

At the conference, delegates will learn leadership skills, develop action plans, prepare presentations, and build a coalition of Vineyard youth and organizations working on sustainable development. With MVTv as a partner, delegates will also learn educational technology skills that will help prepare them for the 21st-century job market.

While Stone Soup was founded on the Vineyard and has remained active here since 1997, Ms. Larned's successful roll-out of her organization's ideology resulted in a great deal of travel for her. She says that over 65 U.S. communities and 29 countries worldwide have embraced the Stone Soup teachings through a book and a curriculum she authored.

Today, however, Ms. Larned is focused on the summer Vineyard Youth Summit from her base in Vineyard Haven. "The timing seems right," she says. "Young people are concerned about the future of the planet. Sustainability may not seem as sexy as climbing the corporate ladder as a lawyer, but everyone can have a sense of building a better world."

Ms. Larned encourages Island businesses and individuals to get involved in the Stone Soup Youth Summit. "We can use help in every form," she says. "You can donate lunch or make sandwiches, provide a ride, or be a mentor. It's a feast for the whole village."