THE GREAT OUTDOORS

Potomac's Grace Lee wants kids to grow up enjoying national parks like she did

BY REBECCA GALE

GRACE LEE STILL REMEMBERS the black Chrysler station wagon, without air conditioning, that her parents would fill with camping equipment every summer. They'd put her and her brother, Richard, in the back seat and drive across the country, stopping at every national park they could.

"We'd take the northern route out west and the southern route back home," says Lee, the daughter of Chinese immigrants. When Lee was growing up in Newark, New Jersey, her parents didn't have much money but did have an affinity for national parks—inexpensive vacation destinations with breathtaking views. "I can still remember the smell of the smoke when we'd cook food outdoors, and every evening the national park rangers put on a program. I loved that."

For years, Lee and her husband, Kenneth, a cardiologist at MedStar Heart & Vascular Institute in D.C., made it a point to take their children, Bethany and Brian, to national parks. The Potomac couple has photos in their kitchen of the family white-water rafting on the Snake River in the Teton. But plenty of people don't get the opportunity to experience the parks, which is something Lee, now executive director of the Rockville-based National Park Trust (NPT), hopes to change. "In 2016, there were over 330 million visits to the national parks—most of the visitors [were] older and white," she says. "By 2044, the census tells us that we are going to be a majority-minority country. If we don't start building that pipeline now of young people that care about the parks, there aren't going to be enough people left that care about it."

Lee, 59, came to NPT in 2006 after her younger child, Brian, now 28, graduated from high school. The stay-at-home mom, who has a background in chemistry, had served on the board of trustees at the Bullis School in Potomac, which her kids attended. Dick Jung, a former headmaster there, later served as a consultant to NPT. He'd seen Lee help craft strategic plans and raise money for scholarships and
professional developments in Berlin, and suggested that she bring these skills to NPT. Within a year, she was executive director.

Since NPT was established in 1953, its primary focus had been to acquire land and donate it to the National Park Service for permanent preservation. But Lee wanted to diversify that mission. The parks needed generational support, she realized. There were too many kids who had never been to a national park, even children at the D.C.-area U.S. Naval Academy who had never been to the White House.

In 2000, longtime NPT insider Pat Kasson took Lee on a phone call to introduce her to national park trips, and the partners discussed Stevens holding a small stuffed dinosaur she'd received as a gift from NPT. As Lee looked at the phone, she realized she'd had a hunch. The following year she helped launch the Buddy Bear School Program, which connects NPT-sponsored field trips to national parks for students at four D.C.-area schools. Each child gets a Buddy Bear T-shirt and small stuffed animal to clip onto a backpack and keep care of, and NPT provides teachers with an educational curriculum that matches their students' grade level. "We know kids love to collect things. We thought if we could inspire them to take 'Buddy Bears' on trips, they'd want to come back," Lee says.

Now in its 15th year, the program partners with six D.C.-area schools across the country—including those in Montgomery County and most of the county's underway-the trips come from donations to NPT. "I tell people, the 501(c)(3), you can send one kid in a national park," Lee says.

Marie Campbell, a teacher at Hasting Hills Elementary School in Silver Spring, uses the trips to teach students about nature. "We talk about the world around us, and the trips help us to learn more about insects, bugs and bats," she says. "It's fun to challenge them to learn about nature. It's fun to teach about the history and the diversity of national parks. It's fun to see the kids excited and engaged." Campbell says the program has "incredible support" and "isn't just about the kids. It's about the whole school community." And it has grown to include 15 schools across the country. In 2017, its first year, 15,000 people participated; in 2018, over 28,000 people participated.

Even as the Trump administration considers exempting her from new laws that would restrict national parks, Lee remains unfazed. Organizations like the NPT are "essential in the national parks," she says, "not only to preserve and protect our national parks, but also to provide access to these places for our youth." She points to a known for D.C.'s Anacostia River, where students on a NPT-sponsored field trip picked up litter along the water and put it in the Same. They even sing: "We're creating the next generation of park stewards."