ITHACA CHILDREN'S GARDEN
1013 W. State St. | Ithaca, NY 14850 | 607-319-4203 | info@ithacachildrensgarden.org

PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

For more information, contact:
CONTACT Erin Martal (she/her), Interim Executive Director
Email: giving@ithacachildrensgarden.org
Phone: 607-227-2982

Remembering Kathleen Downes: Honoring a Legacy of Championing Education, Childhood, Access, Belonging, and Inclusion

Ithaca, NY—April 15, 2024—As April 17th approaches, the Ithaca Children's Garden (ICG) community prepares to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the Celebration of Life of a remarkable woman whose spirit continues to resonate across the organization. Kathleen Downes, a cherished board member and Ithaca City School District (ICSD) special education teacher, left an indelible mark on all who had the privilege of knowing her. Her dedication to fostering inclusive environments and her unwavering commitment to education, social justice, equity, access, and inclusion defined her legacy. Kathleen was actively serving on ICG's board of directors when she died in a tragic car accident on April 12, 2019. Her Celebration of Life, attended by more than 200 community members, was held on April 17, 2019, at Ithaca Children's Garden. The Celebration was covered by Ithaca Journal here.

Quoted in the article, Jesse Spiro, Downes' son, recalled his mother's joy at bringing her grandchildren to the Ithaca Children's Garden for the first time:

"She loved this garden," said Spiro. "It truly was her favorite place."

Central to Kathleen's ethos was the belief that every child deserves opportunities for learning, growth, and exploring the wonders of the natural world, regardless of a family's financial means, disabilities, or other challenges they might be facing.

In honor of Kathleen's enduring legacy, Ithaca Children's Garden is proud to invite the greater Ithaca and Tompkins County community to contribute to the 2024 Scholarship Fund, of which Kathleen was a stong believer and supporter. This initiative, inspired by Kathleen's dedication to access and inclusion,

seeks to close the financial gap that families face in participating in ICG's tuition-based programs. There is currently $49,000 in identified community need, and a generous donor has offered a $20,000 matching gift for funds raised by April 30.

Through generous contributions to the ICG Scholarship Fund, individuals can pay tribute to Kathleen's memory while making a meaningful difference in the lives of more than 100 families this year.

Erin Marteal, Interim Executive Director with ICG, who worked closely with ICG for more than a decade, adds, "Kathleen's core beliefs in social justice, equity, and access, and that every child should have the benefits of knowing nature as a joyful childhood experience influence everything we do at Ithaca Children's Garden. She was a model of putting her beliefs into action with board service, financial giving, and also giving of time and creative energy beyond any expectation. She would bake for every seasonal event at the Garden, and she was a skilled seamstress, knitted scarves and hats, and sewed stuffed turtles for holidays and staff birthday presents. She was a truly remarkable woman. Although she's been gone five years, her voice is still very much alive and in action here every day."

To make a gift to the ICG Scholarship Fund in Kathleen's name, visit ithacachildrensgarden.org and give online, or mail a check to Ithaca Children's Garden, 1013 W. State Street, Ithaca NY 14850.

Ithaca Children's Garden is an award-winning public children's garden free and open to all, every day of the year, dawn to dusk. ICG's mission is to inspire the next generation of environmental stewards, and does so through authentic, hands-on, child-led engagement with the natural world.

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