

## **The Unitarian Church in Westport Youth Group**

### **Earth Ministries**

Our youth leader, Nate Pawelek, had an ambitious idea during the summer of 2021: rejuvenate our teens. Social isolation, loneliness, and hopelessness dropped in on all of us during the pandemic, but perhaps no demographic more harshly than our teenagers.

“I wanted to give them something to inspire them again.” Pawelek pitched an ambitious trip to Alaska. “It needed to be a place like that, far away from their Covid trauma. We couldn’t just go to Alaska to sightsee,” he acknowledged. “There had to be a mission aspect to it.”

Working closely with intern minister, Kim Warman (and many supportive parents), Pawelek created an intensive environmental initiative to increase youth awareness of how much we take our only planet for granted. “The idea was to start local and expand.” Why Alaska? Pawelek answered, “Have you ever been?” Like no other place, it reminds us that nature has the power to restore us in times of despair and despondency.

The broad mission of the initiative is to become better stewards of the Earth. This is in line with our Unitarian Universalist promise to respect “the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part.” We do this first by increasing our awareness of the innumerable ways human activity, even in our own homes, affects the health and sustainability of the Earth, and second, by practicing alternative behaviors that recognize and embrace the moral imperative to live in covenant with the web of life.

How do we prepare? In late February, we consulted with an outdoor wilderness program called Kroka, located in Marlow, New Hampshire. “They designed a winter program specifically to train us for Alaska in April. It was amazing. And cold!” (You can see the video archive of that experience [here](#)). In Alaska, we will live as much as we can like at Kroka: off the grid, no running water, no trash cans. In some stretches of our trip, we will not have access to toilets. We will bring only what we need, including food. To date, we’ve dehydrated fifty pounds of food (now ten pounds!).

There are so many exciting parts of this trip. The first two nights, for example, we will stay at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Anchorage. We will join their Passover Seder dinner and perform during their Easter morning worship service.

We will help an organic gardening group, called Yardocopia, to collect food waste from local restaurants to compost into fertilizer for the short community gardening season.

We will visit the site of the Eklutna Dam, a hydro-electric project from the 1920s (removed in 2017), that impacted the Dena’ina indigenous people’s salmon food source.

We will visit the Alaskan Mountain Range and behold the tallest peak in North America: Denali. As we travel south to Seward, we will witness one of two North American bore tides. The expected size of the daily tsunami is rated “Big” the day we pass by it.

In Seward, the youth group will help the local parks and recreation department build a retaining wall (with stones from the Resurrection Bay) to prevent the encroaching tide, due to climate change, from inundating a heavily-used public cabin.

In Homer, the Center for Alaskan Coastal Studies has designed a program for our youth group to study the effects of climate change on ocean plankton. Across the Kachemak Bay by boat to the Peterson Field Station, we will observe life in tidal pools and learn how local Alaskan ecology is changing from warming oceans.

While some have argued that such a trip is counterproductive because of the amount of carbon emissions we inevitably will disperse into the Earth’s atmosphere just to get there. We believe that the benefit of their awareness offsets the emissions.

The youth have worked hard to raise money for this initiative. They were hired to do several odd jobs around the church campus, collected bottles and cans for cash redemption, raked lawns, sold holiday wreaths, created two appeal videos designed for family and friends, and sponsored a raffle contest to win a cord of wood. Our youth-led, youth-performed benefit concert on March 27 at 2pm is our biggest fundraiser yet.

The 2pm concert will feature music and comedy performed by our talented youth. This Variety Show-style concert will include singing, instrumental music, and even a Try Not to Laugh Contest. We hope that you will join us and support this once-in-a-lifetime endeavor!