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Contact: Debbie Wilmot, debbiew@cityoflafayette.com, 303.661.1225
Keith Desrosiers, keith@thornenature.org, 303.499.3647 x 105

\$2.8 million awarded to connect underserved Lafayette, CO youth to nature and the outdoors

LAFAYETTE, CO – The [Great Outdoors Colorado](#) (GOCO) Board awarded a \$2.8 million grant to the Nature Kids/Jovenes de la Naturaleza Lafayette (NKJN) program for the group's work to connect low-income and Latino youth living in Lafayette to nature and the outdoors. The grant is part of GOCO's [Inspire Initiative](#), which invests in places, programs, and career pathways to get kids outside in communities across the state.

The NKJN program has two goals: (1) to ensure all Lafayette youth live within a safe 10 minute walk to nature; (2) to connect youth to nature through a continuum of pre-k to high-school, backyard to back-country, and family integrated programming. These goals will be achieved over five years by a collaboration of thirty-nine partnering nonprofit organizations, public agencies, and local businesses led by Thorne Nature Experience.

During 2016, low-income and Latino residents from Lafayette participated in a year-long, \$200,000+ planning effort funded primarily by GOCO and Thorne Nature Experience. 200 youth and adults ages 5 to 40, 80% of whom are Latino, helped NKJN collaborators to understand the barriers they face to connecting with nature and the outdoors and their ideas for removing these barriers. Gustavo Renya, Mayor Pro-Tem of Lafayette, has called the NKJN community engagement effort, "the most significant effort to date to reach out to Lafayette's Latino community and learn about the needs of young Latinos and their families."

82 separate programming components to be carried out over five years and capital construction projects to build new parks, trails, and recreational amenities have been designed as part of the NKJN program to address community members stated needs and desires. Programming components include in-school opportunities and field trips for elementary school age youth, for credit academic classes and after school clubs and paid employment opportunities at the middle and high school grade levels, summer camps, and a progression of family nature experiences that include day-long and overnight trips to hike, camp, and participate in the outdoor recreation activities. The capital construction projects will bring nature to the Alicia Sanchez Elementary schoolyard and create linkages between low-income neighborhoods and parks and open spaces. The total NKJN program is valued at \$10.5 million.

Keith Desrosiers, Executive Director at Thorne Nature Experience, believes the NKJN program will change the lives of underserved Lafayette youth. Keith says, "Today more than ever, kids

need help to disconnect from technology and connect to nature, and this is especially true for low-income and Latino youth. A connection to nature has been proven to increase academic achievement and social and emotional health and well-being and decreases childhood obesity. These are just some of the benefits Nature Kids will offer to underserved Lafayette youth.”

The \$2.8 million received from GOCO, will help to fund the first three years of NKJN programming valued at \$3 million and to complete a \$1.8 million capital construction project to transform the Sanchez Elementary schoolyard into a nature play park along with building a new trail to connect local neighborhoods to the school. An additional \$5.4 million has already been pledged by the City’s Open Space Fund, Boulder Valley School District, Thorne Nature Experience and the other partnering organizations, and fundraising efforts are underway to secure the final \$2.3 million required to ensure the entire NKJN vision is brought to life.

“The Nature Kids Project promises to bring a wealth of desirable amenities and connectivity to the entire Lafayette community and especially the underserved youth of Lafayette. We’re honored to be a partner in this unique opportunity and incorporate these exciting enhancements into our Parks and Open Space offerings,” commented Monte Stevenson, Lafayette’s Director of Parks, Recreation, and Open Space.

Programming will begin in June of 2017 with a suite of summer camp offerings and employment opportunities for youth ages 5 to 19 and their families. The Sanchez schoolyard and connector trail project will be designed in 2017 and constructed in 2018. Carlos Lerma, a 25 year-old who lives near Sanchez Elementary and serves as paid liaison between NKJN and Lafayette’s Latino Community says, “Community members are so excited for the programs and projects to begin. It will be a dream come true for youth in my neighborhood to safely walk to nearby nature, be able to explore and learn about the outdoors at school and with their families, and someday to join me in having a career in the environmental sector.”

NKJN’s collaborators are hopeful that the project will become a national model for community scale environmental education. An environmental education project of this scope and magnitude has never been undertaken anywhere in the United States. Keith Desrosiers believes, “The opportunity exists to prove that when environmental education is approached in the right way, it has the power to address the academic and health and wellness challenges faced by low-income and Latino youth and to build the next generation of environmental stewards. The outcomes from this project will expand interest in the development of and funding for programs to connect youth to nature throughout our community, state, and nation.”

The City of Lafayette is dedicated to offering its citizens a high quality of life, active places to play, cultural outlets, environmental sustainability, small-town character, and an engaging community. We invite resident to Be A Part of It... Community Life, Healthy Lifestyles, and Sustainable Living.

Thorne Nature Experience was founded in 1954 and during the past six decades has reached more than 600,000 participants with its unique brand of joyful, hands-on, place-based environmental education programming. Thorne offers summer camp and school-year nature programming and its NATURE FOR ALL Initiative helps to ensure that every youth in Boulder County has the opportunity to experience and connect with Nature. To learn more about Thorne and its history, accomplishments, and current programs, visit www.thornenature.org.