



Lucia Skwarek and Alex Gutierrez (left and middle) met Karen Arndt (right) on the land they all love. In 2020, Lucia and Alex donated a beautiful 65-acre forest with a sensitive wetland.

Two families, one forest, and a gift to the future

When Karen Arndt learned that her grandparents' former house was for sale about five years ago, she knew she had to buy it and fix it up. As a girl, she'd spent summer vacations and weekends exploring the surrounding woods, climbing big white pine trees, and picking blueberries in the 28-acre wetland.

Karen was happy to have this beloved home back in the family, but she was worried about what would happen to the forest and wetland, which no longer belonged with the house.

"This fall, my daughter took a walk behind the house and found some trees marked with yellow tape," Karen explains. "Really hoping that it wasn't being surveyed for development, I left a note on one of the trees with my number. I got a call a few days later from RPA and found out that the land had been donated for conservation and that volunteers were clearing a hiking trail. I was thrilled."

Karen can thank Alejandro (Alex) Gutierrez and Lucia Skwarek. In 1994, a 65-acre parcel—including Karen's childhood pines and wetland—came up for sale. They walked the land and saw seven great blue heron nests in the wetland.

"We were sold," Lucia says, looking back. "When our children were young, we carried them in backpacks on the land. When they were older, we loved to catch salamanders in the marsh."



In summer 2020, they donated the entire property to RPA. With their kids grown, they weren't using the land as often and were also concerned for its future in the face of development pressure.

Lucia and Alex were inspired in part by Albert Family Community Forest in East Nassau. Their hope is for the site—now called Gutierrez Family Forest—to become a place for the community and for it to be part of a network of conserved forestland.

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On a sunny afternoon in November, Karen, Alex, and Lucia met on the land and walked the new trail together, through the pines and along the wetland. Karen showed old photos of her house in 1950, then an abandoned barn. The barn was transformed by her grandparents into a home—through decades of hard work— before leaving the family.

“The house was out of my family for around 30 years,” Karen says, “and to be able to bring it back is indescribable. Now to have the forest immediately surrounding our little parcel protected for wildlife and available for people to enjoy is just amazing.”

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—Karen Arndt, neighbor to Guitierrez Family Forest

Karen plans to keep the house in the family as her grandparents wanted, and for it to again be a place where her cousins and extended family members can gather. Thanks to Alex and Lucia's donation—and support from RPA's members and volunteers—children will be falling in love with big old pines and picking blueberries for years to come.