

Gleefully West Hill Dam gets down and dirty celebrating 'International Mud Day'

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There are two types of people: those who get their hands dirty and those who roll in it.

In a cleared-out area of West Hill Dam's woods, imposing pits of thick brown mud pocked the ground. The park rangers didn't mind. In fact, they tended to the mire until families arrived to greet the slovenly earth with open arms. Some youngsters molded mud to bake mud cakes and play catch. Others let it drip like paint and ooze down mud slides. Parents played their part as laughing mud canvasses and rangers surveyed it all with approval. It seemed everyone had taken leave of their sanity as well as sanitation.

Parent groups Roots in Nature, Woodland Adventures, and Beginning Bridges organized "International Mud Day" at West Hill Dam in Uxbridge, Massachusetts on June 29.

Angie Stormont, an administrator of Roots in Nature, explained the bizarre scene. "International Mud Day' is all about spending more time outdoors: getting in nature, playing in the mud, and getting dirty," she said.

"As dirty as I am right now, I couldn't be happier," said West Hill Park Ranger Ron Woodall as he played in the mud with his wife and two children.

Woodall had spent the morning clearing away brush, setting up road signs, and assembling a truck-mounted water hose. Other rangers had surveyed the area, excavated and mixed soil, and prepared accommodations. "Even with all our efforts, we couldn't have done this on our own," Woodall noted. "The energy, drive, passion, organization, and knowledge of the parent groups was essential."

The West Hill team previously guided the parent groups through the permitting process and then handed them the reigns of the program. Stormont and her fellow parents recruited and planned for nearly 100 attendees by speaking with local communities, networking online, and engaging in back and forth discussions with West Hill Dam. "We were able to recruit so many people by partnering with West Hill," she said. "It's a huge success."

"It's not often you can go play in a mud hole with your son," said one happy father.

"I love it here and I want to come here every day!" howled little Alex Blanchette.

"This event is drawing people out to get familiar with our park," added Woodall.

The partnership may transform the empty mud pit area again in the future. "We hope to build the mud pit area into a nature-based play area instead of a typical playground," Woodall said.

Roots in Nature meets at West Hill Dam every Tuesday for outdoor play groups.