



The first thing one notices about Denise Carleton is her warm smile and fun-loving demeanor. The second is her energy and passion about protecting the environment. Her mantra is “educating and empowering our youth...for a brighter future.” While she has always enjoyed the outdoors and nature, it was just ten years ago that Denise “became green.”

In 2001, the Carleton family—Gary, Denise, and daughters, Hali and Hannah—were living in Alpharetta. Each week, as Denise took her trash and recycling to the curb, she noticed that her neighbor kept their family’s recycling in the garage. When curiosity got the best of her, Denise asked why. She learned that recycling that was in the container at the curb was often being placed in the back of the truck with the trash. Denise decided to start taking her recyclables to the local recycling facility. As she made regular recycling trips, Denise noticed the dramatic decrease in her family’s trash. “We literally cut our trash in half by just paying attention to what could be recycled and what was truly trash,” reflects Denise.

A few years later, the Carletons moved to Windermere, and Hali and Hannah attended Daves Creek Elementary. Denise was excited to learn that Daves Creek had a PTA Environmental Education Committee, and she knew exactly where she wanted to volunteer. “There were great moms and dads on the committee, and it was easy to interact with the group,” shares Denise. She started out as the Recycling Coordinator and moved to Committee Chair.

It was important for Denise to involve the students and teach them that they weren’t too young to make a difference and to be part of something bigger than themselves. Denise created the “Green Team,” a student environmental committee that raises awareness about the problems associated with waste disposal. They educate students, parents, and the community about how to reduce waste through recycling. Because of this group of dedicated students, Daves Creek has won the Keep Forsyth Beautiful Gold Medal five times in the last six years. Denise continues to run the Green Team, even though her daughters are no longer students there.

Hali and Hannah now attend Cornerstone School, and that gave Denise another opportunity to spread awareness about protecting the environment. “I was impressed when I first saw the campus. They left many of the trees in place when they built the school, instead of tearing everything down. It showed that they are environmentally conscious.” Denise created Eco Eagles at Cornerstone, a student club that focuses on recycling and other environmental concerns.

Denise’s fervor for environmental stewardship is evident in every aspect of her life. At home, she involves her family in thinking before tossing something into the trash. “I want to teach the girls to make the right choices in life and in nature,” states Denise. The Carletons grow vegetables in container gardens and often use compost as mulch. Composting encourages healthy root systems, which decreases runoff and reduces or

eliminates the use of synthetic fertilizers. "When pesticides and other chemicals are used, the runoff pollutes water by carrying it to nearby streams. What you do on your property affects more than you—it affects me, too," Denise reveals. "It's bigger than environmental education. There's a purpose in nature and how things work on this beautiful earth. I'm constantly learning and enjoy sharing that knowledge with my family and the community."

When Denise first joined the Environmental Education Committee at Daves Creek Elementary, she met Mary Nix, who had a love of performing arts and created the character "Petunia Garner" to promote various events at the school, including a lunchroom recycling program. Denise and Mary made a great team, and they began reaching out to local schools in an effort to educate students and teachers about how to protect, preserve, and conserve Earth's precious natural resources. By 2009, Denise and Mary had founded Reaping Nature, Inc., a non-profit organization created to provide environmental education programs to schools as well as the general public. By reaching out and developing programs at schools, Denise and Mary are preparing youth to care for and protect Earth's resources for future generations. They also host numerous community events, such as the 3rd Annual Go Green Event at Windermere that will be held on May 1st. It is an afternoon of fun, environmental education, and celebration of the great outdoors.

Denise is also a published author of several children's books. Her storybook *The Gross Graffiti Cover-Up* has been noted as an anti-graffiti educational tool by Keep America Beautiful. For Denise, there is an extra reward in meshing her two passions, writing and environmental stewardship. "It's great to combine my love of writing with my 'Keepin' It Green' message," she says. "It makes me feel good to put pen to paper to entertain and educate."

Using the description of Denise as a "busy wife and mother" is an understatement. "One day I'm a carpool mom, the next I'm an author, and the next I'm a PTA volunteer. But every day I'm a recycler and advocate for Earth's resources." Denise Carleton really is the face of "Keepin' It Green" in Forsyth County.

