By Symone C. Skrzycki

Taltree Arboretum & Gardens
TAKING THE SCENIC ROUTE

"We have about 300 volunteers and they are the most magnificent group to work with. They care about the environment. They care about our mission and they really create the experience for the guests. Their word of mouth makes us special."

Stephanie Blackstock
Interim executive director

Taltree cultivates kids' love of nature through a variety of activities. One child enjoys painting during summer camp while another admires the Railway Garden, an outdoor G-scale model train display that recounts early 19th century U.S. railroad history.

Lay of the land:
• Located in Valparaiso
• 330 acres of woodlands, wetlands and prairies
• Approximately four miles of hiking trails through the woodlands
• 60-plus rare plant species
• Home to one of the most diverse oak collections in North America

Beholding nature:
• Taltree attracted 49,000 visitors in 2014 (a record for the organization), including 4,000 school children. It hosts on-site classes for adults and activities for youth such as a summer camp program and school field trips.

Room with a view:
• One reason Blackstock loves her job? "We were in a staff meeting one day and saw a baby deer being born out the window. It's amazing things like that you don't see every day."

Fired up:
• GLOW: Art after Dark, an annual glow-in-the-dark festival, spans three days and features live entertainment, fire dancers, night hikes, a fireworks show, local artwork and more.

"The kids come with their glow sticks. We have a gift shop where they can buy everything from (glow-in-the-dark) toilet paper to teeth. That's been a big hit for us."

Animal education:
• Children who enter the Adventure Garden learn about a variety of animals, such as American Guinea hogs.

"They once were native to this area, but now are on a conservation list. We have two females and one male, and bred them this year. They had piglets. Those have been very popular and they're related to our mission. We're helping to restore the species."