

Fort Worth

Posted on Mon, Feb. 04, 2008

Gardens where budding young minds can grow

BY DIANE SMITH

STAR-TELEGRAM STAFF WRITER

Star-Telegram / Tom Pennington

Growing up in Hattiesburg, Miss., Jeanne McCarty learned about ecosystems while playing in a creek that was home to frogs and crawfish. "It was a wonderful place for us to play, and now in a lot of places, it's completely concreted," McCarty said.

She wants today's urban children to get similar opportunities to learn from nature. That's her aim as she steps in as the first executive director of the Fort Worth-based REAL School Gardens.

REAL is a nonprofit that uses nature to help educate children.

REAL -- Rainwater Environmental Alliance for Learning -- was established in 2003 by the Rainwater Charitable Foundation, based in Fort Worth.

It has been supporting school gardens as outdoor learning centers since 1996. The program recently hired McCarty with the goal of helping schools nationwide plant more learning gardens.

Garden as classroom

McCarty said there are gardens at elementary schools in the Fort Worth, Arlington and Birdville school districts. The projects bring parents, teachers and students together. Teachers use the gardens for lessons about math, science, art and other subjects.

At Fort Worth's South Hills Elementary, students take time to make and document observations, said Leslie Riddell, assistant principal.

"They don't run out of questions when they are out there looking through the garden," Riddell said.

McCarty said a garden is a classroom because the plants and bugs that thrive there can intrigue young minds.

She spent eight years as vice president and director of the Jane Goodall Institute's Roots & Shoots Program, a global youth conservation program based in Washington, D.C.

Under McCarty's direction, Roots & Shoots grew from 1,200 groups in 50 states to more than 8,000 groups in 92 countries.

REAL, too, hopes to become a national program.

Looking ahead

REAL is making some changes.

McCarty said the group recently moved into a restored historic firehouse on Bryan Avenue. In the spring, there will be a new Web site that schools can use to find out more about the program or network with schools that already have learning gardens.

The group is also working on a new logo and publicity campaign to inform the community about the changes and the opportunity to help.

"There are many school gardens across the country already," said Suzy Peacock, executive director of the Rainwater foundation. "They are little islands. They don't have a support system."

Peacock said REAL can become a link and resource for schools nationwide that want to set up outdoor learning centers.

REAL School Gardens

The program works with urban schools and communities to design, install and take care of school gardens that are used for hands-on learning and to cultivate deeper connections with nature.

The organization works with 830 teachers and more than 17,000 children in 36 elementary schools in North Texas. The Fort Worth school district has 32 gardens, the Arlington school district has three and the Birdville school district has one.

The Rainwater Charitable Foundation has supported school gardens in the Fort Worth area since 1996. The foundation funded REAL in 2003.

817-348-8102 or <http://www.realschoolgardens.org/>

Source: REAL School Gardens

dianesmith@star-telegram.com
DIANE SMITH, 817-390-7675