

McHenry County Workforce Network Butterfly Garden Project

McHenry County Workforce Network partnered with First Institute in Summer 2009 to put youth to work creating Outdoor Living Classrooms at three middle schools in Crystal Lake: Bernotas Middle School, Hannah Beardsley Middle School, and Lundahl Middle School. Eligible youth applied to participate in the Summer Work Program funded by the American Recovery & Reinvestment Act (ARRA), and 20 were placed at Outdoor Living Classroom worksites for 8 weeks. The project was developed to preserve Monarch butterflies, which are on the endangered watch list because milkweed plant populations are not being preserved country-wide.



During the project, youth discussed work skills that would be needed at any worksite, including soft skills, dependability, and working as a team. The project supervisor, Katherine Kennedy, teaches tolerance and acceptance to students in the middle schools, and she discussed with each youth how to tap into their talents. The youth then spent time together discussing how to use the strengths of individual members within their group to best benefit their project – and then one step further – how to reach their future career goals.

The youth built Monarch way stations at each of the three middle schools, but they also spent time planning the project and learning about the conservation of monarch migration. The land was tilled, edged, pruned and planted with plants and flowers in a specific design and layout to attract Monarch butterflies. The youth designed and built butterfly houses, and made pottery stones and water features for the gardens. Each youth was involved not only in planning and building the project, but they then helped document the project for use by the middle school teachers at the three schools. The butterfly way stations were also registered with the University of Kansas's Monarch Watch project. The youth were given supervision, but many of the youth developed into leaders and guided the other youth into tasks that fit their strengths.

Participating youth learned a variety of skills, including teamwork and the value of organization and planning during the project. They completed many arduous manual labor tasks, including ripping the sod out of the garden area. But, they also did writing for the PowerPoint presentations and curriculum developed for the teachers to use in their outdoor science classroom. Art skills were enhanced when making life cycle diagrams and garden accent pieces, such as stepping stones with their hand prints. A time capsule to be opened in the year 2060 was also created for burying at each garden, and items were donated by the youth to represent the world of 2009.

Dedication ceremonies were planned by the youth as well. The gardens at two of the schools were dedicated to those who were important to that individual school. A young boy recently passed away who attended Bernotas Middle School, and his family was especially grateful to have the garden dedicated in his name. The family was also a part of planting the flowers in the garden, which gave the youth workers the opportunity to interact with the family. A former teacher was involved in planning the gardens, but passed away this spring, so the garden there was dedicated to her years of service to the middle schools in Crystal Lake.



The youth found the eight weeks to be memorable because of the lasting effects their hard work will have at each location. One youth said that, “As a leader, I learned about different learning styles. I had to explain what needed to be done and how to do it. I think this will help me be a better teacher, just understanding that people learn differently.” One youth was able to secure employment for the fall based on his interactions with the community during this project.

The Butterfly Project will represent McHenry County as an exemplary program during the Youth Forum hosted by The Workforce Boards of Metropolitan Chicago in October 2009.