

GETTING BACK TO *nature* IN GALLOWAY

BY KATHRYN COULIBALY

The path to environmental education led underneath a fence surrounding a retention pond between Galloway Township Middle School (GTMS) and Reeds Road Elementary School.

A workshop led by Dave Crawford, a teacher from nearby Egg Harbor Township, inspired eighth grade science teacher Debra Sommers and sixth grade teacher Guy Buckelew, affectionally known as Mr. B, to explore their school's backyard. They crawled under an opening in the fence surrounding the retention pond to do reconnaissance on the site as a possible outdoor classroom that the students in three nearby schools could enjoy.

They saw a great blue heron, a red-tailed hawk, and macroinvertebrates. They knew they had a winning idea. They pitched the idea, but at that time, it did not go any further.

Reeds Road was devastated when Buckelew passed away in January 2010. He was a beloved

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teacher, and his colleagues were trying to think of a way to honor his memory. Sommers kept thinking about that visit to the pond and pitched the idea to fifth grade teacher Kathy Warren.

Warren took the idea to her principal, Dr. Bill Zipparo, who enthusiastically supported the idea. With the necessary administrative support to proceed, they were joined by sixth grade teachers Greg Lick from Reeds Road and Jacqueline Baltozer from Galloway's Roland Rogers Elementary School.

The timing could not have been better as budget cuts had eliminated all field trips. This freed up some money for the schools, but also provided a powerful incentive to give the three schools access to Mr. B's for environmental education.

MR. B'S BACKYARD CLASSROOM

In Buckelew's honor, the project was officially named Mr. B's Backyard Classroom. The team applied for and received two grants: one from the Galloway Township Education Foundation and another from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. With those two grants, they purchased picnic tables and supplies used for hands-on labs in the field.

The classroom grew slowly over time, beginning with the 2010-2011 school year, but it had motivated supporters right from the beginning. In addition to the support of professors from nearby Stockton University, which is well-known for its environmental programs, they also have

the AmeriCorps Watershed Ambassadors present two lessons every year on the local Mullica River Watershed and on macroinvertebrates.

Reeds Road Elementary School donated a shed for supplies. U.S. Fish and Wildlife employee Eric Schradling built a dock and bird houses. Schradling's expertise was essential to the team; he advised them on habitat management. Two former Galloway students volunteered to help, earning an Eagle Scout designation by doing various projects that enhanced Mr. B's Backyard Classroom.

THE ECOSYSTEM NEXT DOOR

Guiding the students through the outdoor classroom gave teachers and staff an opportunity to educate students about the amazing ecosystem that was literally in their backyard.

"It's my pet peeve that kids know about giraffes, lions and tigers but they don't know about the animals in their own backyard," Sommers said.

Staff takes students through Mr. B's Backyard Classroom at least seasonally. They can observe the changes in the plants and different behaviors among the many animals that call the classroom home, from frogs to turtles to snakes to birds, and macroinvertebrates.

Students bring iPads with them to take pictures and post them on the Mr. B's Backyard Classroom blog and Instagram.



Sommers observes wildlife with some of her students.



Seventh-graders at Galloway Township Middle School enjoy the outdoor classroom.

NATURE FEST

The team also started Nature Fest, an annual event launched in 2011, in which students select a topic that interests them. The topics must be about South Jersey ecosystems or organisms that would be found in those ecosystems, or important environmental issues. Students then conduct research and put together a lesson to be taught to the visitors. Students use backboards to display facts, provide hands-on materials or actual organisms, play games, and other activities to teach their information to the visitors.

They also invite professional organizations to teach and display facts from their organization. Some of the organizations that have participated over the years are the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Edwin B. Forsythe Wildlife Refuge, Go Green Galloway, N.J. Forest Fire, Atlantic County Utilities Authority, Stockton University, and others.

More than 800 visitors, including kindergarten through eighth-grade students, parents and invited guests, rotate through the presentations. These presentations are anything but dull.

GTMS students Rilyn and Vivian set up a “battle” between the gray squirrel and the Eastern chipmunk to educate people about their strengths and differences.

“Kids don’t want to hear a boring presentation of facts,” Rilyn said. “We turned it into a battle because kids like roasting and teasing each other.”

Warren and her students at Reeds Road Elementary School.



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“A lot of kids liked it so much, they wanted to see the presentation again,” Vivian said. “We’re teenagers, so we know what kids want. We use their weaknesses to persuade them to participate.”

For two weeks leading up to Nature Fest, Sommers’ class invades the library to research their topic and work on their projects and presentations. Sommers has used the grant money to obtain New Jersey-specific books to help her students research their area. She also obtained heavy duty poster board, and the school supplies needed to decorate them. Students conduct research, write field guides, type up facts in easy-to-digest bullets, decorate and organize their presentation boards, develop games or hands-on activities, and practice their actual lesson.

Nature Fest has become an eagerly anticipated event at the schools and in the community. Sommers and Warren agree that it’s the perfect culminating activity.

“By the end of the year, students need these kinds of collaborative projects,” Warren said. “They can’t just sit still and listen anymore. This gets them engaged, active, and developing a sense of pride in their area. We are lucky to live in such a beautiful environment. It’s important for children to recognize the natural beauty that is around them. That gives them a sense of pride.”



Fifth-graders work on Nature Fest projects.

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“We are fortunate to have an administration that supports our program and every year our Galloway Township Education Foundation Grant allows us to add supplies and fund the costs of Nature Fest,” Sommers said.

AN AWARD-WINING PROGRAM

In 2015, they were awarded the New Jersey Governor's Environmental Excellence Award and Honorable Mention from the New Jersey School Boards Association. This program also contributed to their earning the Silver Certification from Sustainable Jersey for Schools.

Warren and Sommers agree that the outdoor classroom and Nature Fest are projects that educators across the state can replicate.

“We have so many resources in New Jersey,” Sommers said. “Regardless of where you live, there's a retention pond or natural area nearby that can be used to teach students about our ecosystem. We were inspired by a teacher to begin our project eight years ago; we would love to see some educators take our ideas and build off them even more.”

To learn more about Mr. B's Classroom, go to mrbsbackyardclassroom.org/gtms-blog

You can also contact Sommers, Warren, and Lick for more information on how to start an outdoor classroom of your own:

- Debra A. Sommers, just retired after 31 years as Galloway Township Middle School science educator: dasommers55@gmail.com
- Kathy Warren, Reeds Road Elementary School 5th grade science teacher: WarrenK@gtps.k12.nj.us
- Greg Lick, Reeds Road Elementary School 6th grade science teacher: LickG@gtps.k12.nj.us

STUDENTS AGREE!

“I learned that by interacting with nature, you can change the world to make it a better place. My favorite is just being able to go outside and see all the beautiful sights of nature and life. My final wishes and thoughts are that Mr. B's Backyard Classroom will change everyone's thoughts on nature to change the world itself.”
Jonathan

“Mr. B's has taught me so much about our ecosystem and all the little things that make our world what it is. They all make a big impact, from the tadpoles to the birds, they have made me want to go back to Mr. B's more and more. Mr. B's has made a huge impact on my view in science and it will stay with me forever.”
Priya

“My most favorite part about Mr. B's Backyard Classroom was the Nature Fest. In that, I got to share my knowledge with several different kids. It was amazing to see all the kids come out and learn hands-on, just the same way I did! Overall, Mr. B's Backyard Classroom is a wonderful place where learning can come alive, literally!” Alex

The students' candid and honest blogs validate the value of our program. See for yourself by going to the Mr. B's Backyard Classroom at mrbsbackyardclassroom.org/gtms-blog

