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Environmentalist of the Year: Alice Steinbrecher

She involved students in duck pond's stewardship

By Erin Duenas

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Village Beacon Record
 December 28, 2011 | 12:41 PM
What could be as innocent as a parent and child enjoying a sunny afternoon at a pond tossing crumbs of stale bread to hungry ducks, who happily gobble up every bite?



Alice Steinbrecher and some of her students on Duck Pond Day this past May, distributing fliers regarding the Duck Pond project. Photo from Steve Donohue

Turns out this childhood rite of passage can do serious damage to the ducks and thanks to the efforts of Wading River Elementary School's second graders, led by teacher Alice Steinbrecher, the ones that live in Wading River Duck Pond are better protected.

Through their participation in Brookhaven National Lab's Open Space Stewardship program, in addition to ducks, Steinbrecher's class studied the various aspects of the pond such as the temperature and oxygen levels of the water and observations of the surrounding environment. They also had lessons on the history of the pond and the surrounding community.

Melvyn Morris, coordinator of the Open Space program and administrator of the lab's educational programs, said the stewardship program, in its sixth year, was created with the goal of getting children outside and connected to their environment.

"Kids just don't go outside anymore," said Morris, a former high school science teacher. "We wanted to find a way to get them outside and take responsibility for their environment and to give them a sense of pride and sense of place."

For the second time this past summer, Steinbrecher took a week-long workshop offered at the lab to learn how to participate in the program. She brought what she learned into the school and got the entire second grade on board to do the project at the duck pond. This school year's second-graders are the second class to participate.

"She's really embraced it," Morris said. "She has integrated it into the curriculum."

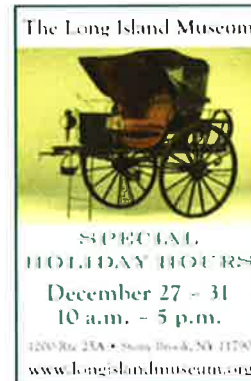
Her dedication to the stewardship of the pond and fully involving her students in the process has earned Steinbrecher the honor of Environmentalist of the Year by The Village Beacon Record.



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Debbie Lohman of the Open Space program, worked closely with Steinbrecher's class last school year, accompanying them on field trips to the pond and visiting them in the classroom. She said the data collected from classes each year can be very valuable.



The sign alongside the pond. Photo by Erin Duenas

"It allows us to document changes over time," Lohman said.

Part of the students' assignments includes taking monthly trips to the pond with their parents to take water samples that are then sent back to BNL.

Mary Flatley's son Liam is in Steinbrecher's class this year and they are scheduled to take their water sample sometime this month. Flatley said that Liam is very excited about the project and he

looks forward to the chance to engage in the hands-on learning. "It's a great thing," Mary Flatley said. "It is much more exciting for a second-grader to actually do something rather than just hearing about it in the classroom."

Ducks who fill up on bread don't seek out food that is part of their natural diet and, as a result, they are deprived of essential nutrients, Lohman explained.

"The bread swells in their stomachs. It prevents them from absorbing what they need; it's just false calories." The resulting malnutrition causes a condition called Angel Wing, where the wings stick out from the duck's body instead of laying flat and restrict the animal from flying.

The class was so concerned about the ducks' well-being that they wrote a letter to Councilwoman Jane Bonner (C-Rocky Point), urging the town to post a sign at the pond warning the public about the danger in feeding the ducks. Bonner said it was already against town code to feed waterfowl but the sign was brought about due to the stewardship project.

"You think you're doing the right thing feeding the ducks but you're actually doing harm," Bonner said. "It proves you are never too old to learn something new."

Bonner said Steinbrecher deserves credit for being creative and getting the children engaged. "I always had a special affection for a teacher who brings the lesson alive. She embraced the topic so fully," Bonner said. "She made me feel as excited as her students."

Principal Stephen Donohue called the stewardship program a "terrific interdisciplinary project" that offered the adults a chance to learn right along with the children. He recalled that at one of the field trips, the class was learning about the water's turbidity or cloudiness. "Some of the adults didn't know what that meant," said Donohue. "We all learned something."

While noting the study of the pond was a team effort of the entire second grade, Donohue credited Steinbrecher with taking the lead in teaching students the importance of taking ownership of their community.

"Seeing the kids studying the pond, taking notes on a clipboard, it's amazing. We told them they are journalists, scientists and researchers," Donohue said. "This is the stuff kids need to learn about."

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