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WHERE GREEN LESSONS TAKE ROOT: BCF SUPPORT OF NEIGHBORHOOD DESIGN CENTER BRINGS NEW RAIN GARDENS TO CITY SCHOOLS



Through their work with the Neighborhood Design Center and Irvine Nature Center, students convert paved areas at their schools to rain gardens, learning that a 250 square foot garden can absorb runoff from 25,000 square feet of hard surface.

Like a pebble dropped into water, the impact of funding provided by the Baltimore Community Foundation has a way of rippling out to create unexpected but welcome results. Such is the case with BCF's general operating support to the Neighborhood Design Center (NDC).

Founded in 1968, NDC has worked to improve Baltimore neighborhoods by providing pro-bono design and planning services in support of community-spon-

sored initiatives. Drawing on the skills of volunteer architects, planners, landscape architects, engineers, and other design professionals, NDC donates these services to help local groups in the initial stages of neighborhood revitalization efforts.

"NDC provides support to a wide range of community groups. They're one of the most effective intermediary organizations in Baltimore," says Cheryl Casciani, BCF's Director of Community Investments. "The way that NDC helps neighborhoods is so varied; you really can't go wrong in sup-

porting their efforts. What they do is always relevant to BCF's broader agenda."

THE GREENING OF SCHOOLYARDS

NDC's recent efforts on the environmental front certainly bear out Casciani's point. For the last five years, NDC has worked in partnership with Irvine Nature Center to support the Center's Schoolyard Discovery Program. Originally an urban outreach program that provided environmental science education for city students, Schoolyard Discovery has expanded to include a new component—schoolyard habitat gardens that are planned and installed by students themselves, with the help of Irvine staff and volunteers. Irvine also helps schools find funding for the garden projects, which typically cost between \$1,000 and \$5,000.

"We believe that teaching kids in their schoolyard is the best way for them to learn about the environment," says Rick Hobbs, Irvine's Schoolyard Habitat Coordinator. As a part of the overall program, Irvine works with the school and its surrounding community to create a master plan for the garden. "Typically, our planning team will be made up of administrators, teachers, and representatives from neighborhood associations," says Hobbs. "We try to get as many stakeholders involved as possible, as we *continued on back*

know that their buy-in will keep these gardens maintained.”

STOPPING RUNOFF

While students can choose from a variety of gardens to plan and create, one of the most popular has been the rain garden—and with good reason, says Hobbs. “In talking with students, we can tie in that there is so much concrete in our city and so many ways for run-off and pollutants to get into the Chesapeake Bay through our storm drain system,” he notes. “Just by digging up this small area of concrete or asphalt and planting a garden around a storm drain, all of the pollutants that would have gone into the Bay are now being filtered through this garden and cleaning the water. Plus, the gardens also help prevent the flooding that results from clogged storm drains.”

But to achieve the desired professional results for these garden projects, Irvine approached NDC for help. “They had the skills and resources for their environmental education program, but what they were missing was the professional planning and design expertise that we could bring to it,” says Mark Cameron, NDC’s Executive Director. “With these gardens, we’ve helped them create outdoor classrooms

where kids can learn more about environmental stewardship in nature. In addition, the gardens serve as a mechanism for education and community engagement.”

NDC’s engagement has proved integral to the garden projects. NDC staff and volunteer landscape architects take part in school planning committees from the start,

“You really can’t go wrong in supporting Neighborhood Design Center’s efforts.”

and also play an important classroom role by involving students in the planning steps of creating their school’s garden. After receiving feedback from students and committee members alike, the NDC landscape architect incorporates everyone’s ideas into a formal master plan. NDC also works with Irvine to create the gardens—finding contributions of free plants and trees, coordinating volunteers to break ground and prepare the site at the school, and then working with students to do the actual planting.

AN INVESTMENT IN SUSTAINABILITY

The results to date have been “outstanding,” according to Cameron. In particular, BCF’s operating support enabled NDC to help create rain gardens at Baltimore’s Thomas Johnson Elementary and Abbottston Elementary Schools in 2006. “I think the kids really get it,” says Cameron. “What we’d like to see next is how to get kids involved with efforts outside of school involving environmental stewardship.”

NDC’s impact upon the Schoolyard Discovery Program has been huge, says Hobbs. “NDC’s been a great partner; they know what it takes to get a project going and maintained in a community,” he says. “They’ve been invaluable not only in bringing in expertise but in creating a culture around this program on how it best works.”

BCF’s Casciani agrees. “Groups like the NDC provide the most effective means of leveraging a small grant to create the greatest range of results on the community level—creating sensible spaces like playgrounds and gardens,” she notes. “What they’ve done is consistent with BCF’s own efforts to support the City’s sustainability goals. It’s an investment that every citizen needs to make.”

