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Thursday, May 1, 2008

## Community works together to create natural classroom

by Connor Adams Sheets | Staff Writer

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Observing plants and animals interacting with one another in nature is an integral part of the life-science curriculum at Brunswick Elementary School. Once the “schoolyard habitat“ project, which broke ground Saturday, is complete, students and teachers will have a greater opportunity to do just that.

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“We are creating a natural habitat for kids to observe and explore and learn about science and ecology,” said fifth-grade teacher Troy Miller, one of the project’s leaders. “The walls of our classrooms have been extended to the great outdoors.”

The project, which Miller says could take another year or two to complete, will also bring a newfound beauty to the Brunswick Elementary campus. Volunteers came to the school Saturday and Sunday to help clean up, mulch and weed existing flowerbeds, rejuvenate and define an existing nature trail, plant a wildflower meadow and lay sod around playground equipment.

“We were working in the leaves. We took shovels and put the leaves in buckets and put them in a

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wheelbarrow and put them on the pile,” said Travis Smith, a second-grader at Brunswick Elementary and a Wolf Scout in Brunswick’s Pack 277. Travis said his favorite part was getting to ride in the wheelbarrow: “It was really fun.”

The project became a real possibility in January when Brunswick Elementary’s Parent Teacher Organization received a \$5,000 grant from Lowe’s Home Improvement.

“Lowe’s believes that education is the cornerstone to building bright futures and stronger communities. This project will engage students and also provide them another tool they can use to excel,” the company said in a statement.

Since then, the project has received support in other forms. Stadler’s Nursery planted trees for the project through the Potomac Conservancy’s Legacy Tree Program, which provided for large price discounts. Chuck Wade Sod Farm made a large sod donation and King’s Pizza donated pizzas to feed the volunteers.

The community of Brunswick has come together to create the habitat, leaders say. The PTO, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, students, parents and staff at Brunswick Elementary and Middle schools and church groups have all lent volunteer hours to the project.

“What a community effort!” raved Brunswick Elementary Principal Gerald DeGrange. “So many people have jumped on board, it’s just unbelievable ... The Lowe’s money is the impetus, but the ladies in the PTO put it together, and Troy jumped on board, and it’s really incredible how quickly this all came together.”

Miller said he could already see the fruits of their labors in the form of students’ sparked curiosity while working on the project Saturday.

“Kids cleaning the trails were like, ‘hey, Mr. Miller! Look at this tree – why does it do that? Look at this mushroom,’” he said. “It’s a natural tendency of kids to ask questions about the world around them, and this trail will allow them to do just that.”

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