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LIVING

Schoolyard goes mean to green

Edmison Heights at forefront of ecological movement when project began in 1990

(First of two parts)

When we think of schoolyards, images of windswept landscapes, bare expanses of closely-cropped grass, dusty baseball diamonds and sterile asphalt usually come to mind. This certainly used to be the reality at Edmison Heights Public School on Marina Blvd., where I taught for 26 years. However, in the early 1990s, a small ecological revolution known as schoolyard naturalization began, and projects sprang up in a number of urban elementary schools in the Peterborough area. The end result was not simply the planting of hundreds of trees and shrubs but also the creation of "outdoor classrooms" and quiet, shaded natural play areas right on the schoolgrounds.



teers. The Edmison Heights Community School Association (now called the school council) provided the \$2,000 in funding for the 21-foot by 21-foot, A-frame, post and beam structure. Since then, the plan has been copied by numerous schools throughout the Peterborough area. In addition to providing shade, the shelter has seating for 30 students and therefore serves as a meeting spot for classes who visit the Habitat.

In 2003, I worked with parent volunteer Ann Wayne to develop a plan to naturalize additional sections of the schoolyard by planting more clusters of trees, adding

natural and man-made play features such as rocks and climbers and building a limestone-screenings path. Using these desired features as a guide, Basterfield and Associates then prepared a detailed, scale plan for the entire schoolyard. In May of the same year, 20 large native trees were planted, thanks to a \$2500 Toyota Evergreen Learning Grounds Award of Excellence grant. In 2010, we added a new butterfly garden and built a number of large cedar benches to provide seating for an entire class. These latest additions to the Habitat were largely thanks to the work of parent volunteer Dave Mahoney, teachers Luc Labelle, Lysa Boutin and Martha Hunter, and then-principal Gloria Tompkins.

WOODS AND MEADOW

The Habitat now includes a mostly wooded area on the north side and a more open, meadow-like area with scattered shrubs and small trees to the south. In the meadow area, there is wood-clad storage shed (thanks to parent volunteer Michael McGuire), butterfly garden, bird feeders, bird houses, interpretive signs and a three-bin school compost. The sun shelter is located just outside the entrance to the meadow. In the wooded section - which now feels like a small but natural woodland - you will also find the new class seating area. A network of pathways snakes through both sections of the Habitat.

Over 50 species of trees, shrubs, and flowers can be found, nearly all of which are native to the Kawarthas. Some of the main species include Black Cherry, Nannyberry, Highbush-cranberry, Staghorn Sumac, Red-osier Dogwood, Alternate-leaved Dogwood, White Ash, White Cedar, White Spruce, Trembling Aspen, Balsam Poplar, Common Milkweed, New England Aster and Canada Goldenrod.

In my next column, I will look at how the staff and students use the Habitat Area.

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CORRECTION

The bumble bee shown in a photograph in last week's column was misidentified. It was not a rare Rusty-patched Bumble Bee but rather the much more common Tri-coloured Bumble Bee.



DREW MONKMAN

OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Our project to naturalize a half-acre of the Edmison Heights schoolyard started in the fall of 1989, partly on my own initiative, along with help from principal Ron Brown and fellow-teacher Lynn-Marie Gallant. This makes it one of the oldest projects of its kind in Ontario.

At the outset, our goal was simple: to provide much-needed natural habitat for birds, insects and plants by involving students in a hands-on environmental action project. We also wanted to show students that you don't have to leave the city to experience nature. In fact, you can bring nature right to your own backyard or, in this case, to the schoolyard. I have always felt that the best way for students to become environmentally literate and to love and care for the natural world is by working and playing in natural settings as much as possible. I also wanted the children to understand that natural habitat is disappearing at an alarming rate everywhere in the world and that creating even small pockets of habitat really does benefit wildlife. These sorts of projects also provide a sense of empowerment to everyone involved.

QUARTER-ACRE SITE

Once Ron had obtained permission from the school board and the Otonabee Region Conservation Authority (ORCA) to go ahead with the project, we did a site survey to determine the appropriate location and size. We decided to locate the initial quarter-acre planting in a corner of the schoolyard bordered by Bear's Creek to the west and the backyards of homes on Edmison Dr. to the north. This allowed us to connect the area to some pre-existing natural features such as a mostly natural hedge corridor leading to a nearby stand of trees.

Our main planning resource was a Canadian Wildlife Federation booklet called *Learning About Wildlife*. The guide proved invaluable since none of us had any previous experience with a project of this type. We were able to secure initial grant money from a number of sources such as the CWIP program at the Ministry of Natural Resources, Canadian Wildlife Federation "Habitat 2000" program and the Shell Environmental Fund. The Edmison



son Heights School Council also provided financial help. Most of the money was used to purchase trees and shrubs from Fisher Nursery, Richardson Farms Ltd and Horlings Garden Centre.

The official sod-turning was held on Earth Day of April 1990, with the entire student body in attendance. I remember that the staff and students all formed a circle around the designated area, joined hands and sang "It's a Small World." When the actual planting began, we were able to involve all of the classes in at least some facet of the work. With the appropriate supervision, the older students dug holes, removed rocks, built paths and then planted the dozens of trees and shrubs. Younger students spread mulch and helped to water. The students thoroughly enjoyed the work and quickly developed a sense of ownership for the area. This proved to be very important in minimizing the amount of vandalism that inevitably occurred. Many of the teachers on staff,

too, took a personal interest in the project. I remember Audrey and Peter Keitel taking a group of us to the Keene area after school one day to dig up trees for transplanting. Head custodian, Glen Lewis, was also very helpful and even made our first Habitat sign.

DOUBLE THE SIZE

In 1992, we decided to double the size of the "Habitat Area" as we now called it by expanding to the south. A student committee was organized to provide input on what features they would most like to see included. The students built a three-dimensional scale model of the newly expanded area out of plasticine. The plan they came up with included features such as a meadow habitat, butterfly garden, rock pile, birdbath and student vegetable garden. The model was presented to the student body at the 1992 Earth Day assembly. Then, on a rainy Saturday morning in May, the student committee, along with their

DREW MONKMAN photos

The evolution of a varied eco-environment at Edmison Heights elementary school began in 1990 (top left photo) when then-principal Ron Brown oversaw a sod turning ceremony at a conventional grass and gravel school yard. By 1992 the Habitat Area (top right) was filling in nicely. A sun shelter children could enjoy during recess and other activities is seen in use in 1996 (at left). By 2010 the Habitat Area (above) was a green, naturalized space with a split rail fence.

parents, friends, a few teachers and even several neighbours began the actual work of preparing the gardens and planting almost 100 new trees and shrubs. In August, a seating area was built using logs donated by ORCA.

The next few years saw many changes. We received the donation of a garden shed and replaced the original page-wire fence with cedar rails. In 1993, we also undertook a major planting of shade trees just outside of the Habitat. These included a number of poplar and ash, all of which have thrived and now provide much-appreciated shade to students. 1996, we came up with the idea of adding a sun shelter, so that students would have a shaded area to play or just to sit and chat. A school-wide contest was held in which students built models of the kind of shelter they would most like to see.

SUN SHELTER ADDED

Incorporating ideas from the students, the final version was designed by Gary Henderson, a parent at the school, and built by parent and teacher volun-