Once an illegal dump site, Eden Place Nature Center is now the doorway to nature for residents of southside Chicago.

Building an Urban Oasis

Story By Kathy Andrews
Photos Courtesy Chicago Zoological Society

Once upon a time, residents of Fuller Park, the smallest of the 77 Chicago neighborhoods, had a reputation they weren't proud of. Fuller Park was the community with the most vacant lots, highest levels of lead poisoning in its children and, for more than 35 years, was the site for illegal dumping.

But things changed after Michael and Amelia Howard returned to her childhood home. These community activists organized Saturday cleanup days, with a grill of hot dogs ensuring plenty of young muscle showed up to help. Years of volunteers, sweat, community meetings and cases of hot dogs later, more than 200 tons of debris had been removed from the 3.5-acre illegal dump site across the street from the Howard family residence. A metamorphosis had occurred and the eyesore became Eden Place Nature Center, a refuge within a community once seriously plagued with crime and apathy.

At Eden Place, youth learn where their food comes from, and, as teenagers, can work to grow and market organic produce.

(Photo courtesy Michael Howard.)

After an illegal dump site was transformed into an inner-city nature center, a community began to celebrate and protect our shared natural resources.

Today, Eden Place bustles with activity as children from throughout the city explore wetland, prairie and woodland habitats. They gather under a wigwam to hear the costumed re-enactor of Jean-Baptiste Pointe DuSable, who in 1776 established a trading post at the mouth of the Chicago River, recount stories of his life in Haiti, France and North America.

Department of Natural Resources Director Marc Miller commended Eden Place sponsors and volunteers for development of a model nature center.

Visiting the children's farm they learn where their food comes from. And, neighborhood children have opportunities to visit other facilities where they can broaden their understanding of the environment and Chicago.

Howard, honored as an Illinois Environmental Hero in 2009, is pleased with the process of engaging children in new ways of learning.

"While we do have a lot of science-based activities taking place, Eden Place is so much more," Howard remarked. "Through a reading program with area schools we bring a book to life through a day of activities. Here children learn to navigate a map, use a compass, conduct statistical analyses, sample water quality and much more. The bottom line is that they come to Eden Place and have so much fun that they don't know they're learning."

After attending a fall event at Eden Place last year, Department of Natural Resources Director Marc Miller cited Eden Place as a model neighborhood environmental center.

"What the Howards and volunteers have accomplished is truly amazing and speaks volumes to the power of a community," Miller said. "This concept is what we should be replicating throughout the state, not only in urban settings but throughout suburban and rural communities as well. We've only begun to realize how Eden Place will touch the lives of Fuller Park children for generations to come."

The Howard's work doesn't stop with children. In conjunction with the U.S. Forest Service, the organization sponsors two job-training programs. In one, teenagers spend their summer raising organic produce and market their wares within the community. The second is a 16-week job-training program at Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie which, over the past three years, has taught more than 300 unemployed men and women construction skills—skills which stand prominently at Midewin in projects such as two, 110-foot pedestrian bridges and stone wayside exhibits.

Little did the Howards and volunteers know as the formerly debris-laden lot was planted with a host of native

Events at Eden Place provide up-close and hands-on opportunities to learn about natural resources.

Children gather around Michael Howard (back, center) and friends during an Eden Place festival.

plants, including milkweeds, that within a decade they'd have swarms of monarch butterflies, and earn recognition from Governor Pat Quinn as the Official State of Illinois Monarch Butterfly Education Site.

"Last fall, the Fuller Park community tagged monarch butterflies for MonarchLIVE (http://monarch.pwnet.org), an international conservation program, as a way of enhancing the concept that citizens have a role in the scientific process," Howard said. "And in our schools students are not only learning the natural history of the monarch, but are garnering a broader understanding of international issues by participating in satellite correspondence with people in South America, England and South Africa."

Like the monarch butterflies they witness changing from egg to caterpillar to chrysalis to butterfly, the community has undergone its own metamorphosis. No longer do children play in trash-filled vacant lots heavily contaminated with lead and asbestos. Instead, they have a thriving, biologically diverse neighborhood refuge.

At a glance

Eden Place Nature Center, 4417 S. Stewart Avenue, Chicago, IL 60609
Telephone: (773) 624-8686
Web site: www.edenplacenature center.com/AboutUs.html
Hours of operation: Tues.- Fri. 9 a.m.-4 p.m., Sat. 9 a.m.-3 p.m.

Partnerships

In addition to partnering with the Department of Natural Resources, Eden Place Nature Center has an extensive network of partners and collaborative projects which, through days of adventure and activity, expose residents of Fuller Park to the natural and cultural resources of Chicago—and beyond. Partners include Openlands, U. S. Forest Service, Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum, Sierra Club, Chicago Zoological Society, Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago Wilderness, Brookfield Zoo and John G. Shedd Aquarium.

At Eden Place, families can revert to a simpler time, when relaxing and playing outdoors was the norm. There, they can recline on lush grass under a shade tree, breathing in air perfumed by native wildflowers while they listen to farm animals or watch a red-tailed hawk circle overhead.

And, if they're not careful, visitors just might walk away having learned something.

Unemployed men and women develop construction skills through a job-training program Eden Place has created in partnership with Midewin National Tallgrass Prarie.

(Photos courtesy U.S. Forest Service.)