

Community Groups and Volunteers come together to build a bridge at the Drexel Woods

by John Gaskins

Last Saturday, March 5th, members of various local groups volunteered their time to construct an 18 foot bridge on the Blue Trail in the Drexel Woods. Rick Dutko, the naturalist of The Friends of the Lawrence Nature Center, and Madeline Price, president of Students Against Violating the Earth (SAVE) led the effort. Brett Smith, President of The Greater Eldridge Park Neighborhood Association, and local residents Jerry Whitmore and Nathan Harris contributed labor and expertise. Samuel Olando and Anthony Montgomery of the Eggerts Crossing Civic League pitched in with much appreciated muscle power.

The Blue Trail crosses a few steep sided creeks and wetland areas that can often be difficult for young children and less able bodied adults to traverse, especially without hiking boots. Lawrence youth Eliot Nagele recently constructed a 120 foot boardwalk on the wettest and most flood prone section of trail as his Eagle Scout project. However a few feet beyond this boardwalk the trail dips and crosses a seasonal stream which feeds into the Shabakunk. Clearly the only solution here would be a bridge. However it needed to be constructed at minimal cost and without foundations and center supports because these are not allowed in environmentally sensitive wetland areas.

Rick Dutko utilized the remaining funds from an old grant for materials, sketched out a simple but sturdy and dramatic design utilizing three massive support beams, and with his sons, preassembled some of the parts. Madeline Price scheduled other SAVE members to participate while the FLNC people recruited local men to help with the some of the heavy work. The 18 foot long support beams needed to be carried over ¼ mile down a muddy and partly obstructed trail.

At 2 PM on Saturday the participants met at the Lawrence Nature Center. While SAVE members prepared the site, four man teams carried the beams through the woods and to the end of the boardwalk. Samuel Olando, demonstrating great skill with the axe, made short work of a series of logs which had fallen over the area. Soon the beams were laid across the gully and adjustments made by Brett and Rick to account for the uneven ground and the bowing of the wood. Long-time contributor to projects at the nature center, Nathan Harris drove in many of the larger and more difficult screws as the project began to take shape. Jerry Whitmore demonstrated the proper use of the drill to each of the students, as every SAVE member got a turn driving screws to fasten the planks across the supports.

Fortunately the bridge was finished before daylight started to fade. As if on cue, a family was hiking down the trail as the last screws were being driven into place. So all hands scrambled

to remove tools and supplies from bridge so that a diminutive black and tan dachshund could trot ahead and inaugurate the latest enhancement to the trail system at the Drexel Woods.

Numerous further improvements are scheduled for the White and Blue trails. The township has received a New Jersey Recreational Trails grant to improve approximately 750 linear feet along the White trail so that students can more easily walk from the playground at Lawn Park elementary school to the nature center building and meadow. Several more Eagle Scout projects are in the works to build boardwalks over the remaining muddy sections of the Blue Trail. The ever energetic Mr. Dutko is talking about a second bridge, perhaps as a scout undertaking, to span the last sizeable dip on the trail.

The Lawrence Nature Center and adjoining Drexel Woods are a township park, which is located at 481 Drexel Avenue. The first buds and green shoots of Spring should appear any day now. So this is an ideal time to come and take a walk through the woods and down to the Shabakunk creek. If you are reasonably quiet you may see a dozen deer in the forest, the resident great horned owl at the edge of the meadow, the industrious pileated woodpecker, a kingfisher or a pair of mallards near the water. The Blue and White trails together form a 1 mile loop, which will take you back to your starting point. Sturdy boots are recommended most of the year.