



Volunteering at Lawrence Nature Center

by Sue Herrmann

I received a lovely special request letter from the "Transition Coordinator" at The Newgrange school in Hamilton. She said she had four high school students who would like to volunteer at Lawrence Nature Center (LNC) in Lawrenceville. They could help with any projects we had for three hours every Wednesday for two months. How terrific! Our students arrived the first day with lots of excitement, personal drive, and a faculty job coach. The first project was to move all loose tree limbs and debris on the property into big piles for township pickup. This work took several Wednesdays! I have never seen such joy and cooperation doing hard work outdoors as was exhibited by the Newgrange volunteers! Lunchtime each day was for talking about the morning's work, learning the history of Lawrence Nature Center, becoming comfortable in the nature center building and getting to know the LNC board of trustees' vice president and president who enjoyed working with the Newgrange School volunteers.

Our next Wednesday rained, so we all worked inside the nature center building in the library, organizing our donated nature and science books. Students also selected favorite books to read; later they drew actual nature specimens or copied guidebook photographs with colored pencils. Each student brought his artwork home.

Another Wednesday, the Newgrange School volunteers were shown from our windows, a robin's nest with babies located near the nature center's front door! We carefully worked outside not disturbing the mother robin as she gathered food and flew back and forth to feed her babies. We raked the front and side lawn areas to get the property ready for Lawrence Nature Center's annual "Mother Nature Festival." After lunch, we folded 150 brochures for this event. Students were invited to attend the free festival with their families.

For a few additional weeks, the volunteer group hiked in Drexel Woods. They cleared the four hiking trails of any branches that blocked the paths, picked up trash, and enjoyed the educational hikes. The group observed rotting wood vs. living wood; saw a live garter snake; learned about the many species of plants, woodland flowers and trees; were told about the Lenni Lenape Indians and Shabakunk Creek; and acquired knowledge about various Boy Scout and Girl Scout projects: wood duck box, blue bird boxes, screech owl box, benches, tree signs, numerous boardwalk sections and a wooden bridge. Everyone also heard many bird species chirp and learned about the pair of great horned owls whooooo lives in Drexel Woods.

The final Wednesday, each student was presented a personalized certificate of appreciation for their volunteer work at Lawrence Nature Center. We said our goodbyes and students gave me hugs 😊 Very special friendships were developed between The Newgrange School volunteers and Lawrence Nature Center officers. Many thanks to the Transition Coordinator, several job coaches and the students. They are always invited back for more volunteer projects, a class trip or recreation!

"Newgrange is a nonprofit organization celebrating 35 years of success in educating people with learning and related disabilities. The school serves students with language-based as well as non-verbal learning disabilities who are between the ages of 7 and 21. Newgrange is a NJ Department of Education-Approved School for Children with Disabilities, and is focused on the fulfillment of individual education programs, ultimately including transition to post-graduate opportunities." Source: <http://www.thenewgrange.org/>