

GROWING

BY ED HENSLEY

UP

Margaret Mead once said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has." For trail building and stewardship, a slight variation on that observation is proving true: "Never doubt that a group of thoughtful, committed small citizens can change the world." Around the country, organizations and individuals are coming up with innovative ways for children to become trail builders, users and advocates.

STARTING SMALL

Hall School science teacher Mary Ann Healey never worried that her third graders would be lost in the woods or the brook where she took them for science lessons. She worried about losing the woods and the brook.

The wooded area next to the school grounds is small. Capisic Brook is tiny. To the third, fourth and fifth grade classes she teaches in the Portland, Maine, school, however, it was "the great outdoors," at least what you could see of it beneath the trash and the pile of shopping carts clogging the stream.

Healey decided that a trail project would make the area more accessible for students, and raise community interest in preserving it. She and some fellow teachers went to work on the idea, with the support of Portland Trails (www.trails.org), a nonprofit devoted to circling the city with a linked trail system. ("Teachers are busy," says Laura Newman, education coordinator for the organization. That's why Portland Trails takes on the technical and bureaucratic part of trail building for them.)

A 2001 AmeriCorps service-learning grant got the process started. A similar 2002 grant got the first quarter-mile stage of the Hall School Trail finished. Five classrooms of first to fifth graders participated from start to finish, from planning and design to raking the final trail into place. The rest of the school community, as well as many parents and neighbors, also contributed to the cleanup, ground preparation and trail building.

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TRAILS

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In Portland, Maine, Hall School students rake a trail mixture of bark and sand as part of a classroom trail project ... and take great pride in their work.

Healey. "Learning from real-life experience is much more effective than learning from something made up in the classroom."

At Hall School, students and teachers alike learned that there's much more to a trail than the final strip of smooth surface. "The actual trail building was only a small part of the whole experience," says Healey. One of the students' first projects was to write to the Portland public works department, asking for the area to be cleaned out. Sure enough, a few months later, the city hauled off the debris, a job that included dredging 21 shopping carts, a motor and a boat from the stream.

During the planning phase, the children held brainstorming sessions. "It's remarkable how much they thought about," says Healey, from "off-the-wall ideas like a skate park and a Jacuzzi to others that were pretty down to earth." The children discussed accessibility and preservation, pollution and politics. They tested trail surface materials. And they were genuinely concerned about having to cut down trees. "They were concerned that a trail would change the area too much. It sounded like a freeway to them."

Rita Rubin-Long, who teaches first and second grade at Hall and helped organize the project, has vivid memories of the week the trail was constructed last spring. More than 600 students, representing every classroom, took part in laying the trailbed after adult volunteers had prepared the ground. Rubin-Long pieces together the scene as if plopping down mental snapshots. Kids at the "Big Pile" with shovels. Kids pushing wheelbarrows of Superhumus, the chosen trail material. Kids solving problems such as getting the wheelbarrows over a steep hill. Kids shaping the trail with rakes. With each image, her own excitement comes back. "They were having a ball. They just loved it."

On an outing last fall, Rubin-Long overheard a second grader brag to a first grader, "I built this trail. This is my trail." Many Hall students remain vocal and conscien-

tious about keeping the trail tidy. The farewell gift of the last “graduating” fifth grade class was a granite bench for the trail. Nor will that first generation of trail builders at Hall School be the last. Current students already are planning the next phase—an observation deck looking down on the stream.

The benefits of the Hall School trail go beyond the campus and the trail itself. The neighborhood around the school contains single-family homes and a low-income housing project. “We were worried that there would be vandalism,” admits Rubin-Long, “but there has been none.” And not a single shopping cart has been dumped into Capisic Brook since the trail went in.

NEVER TOO EARLY

“I don’t believe there is ever a time that is too early to get kids outside,” says Andrea Napolitano-Romer, who teaches first and second grade at Riverton School, also in Portland. “At ages 6, 7 and 8, students are emerging as learners and readers. They are aware of their surroundings and beginning to have a sense that they can impact life around them.”

She ought to know. Unlike the Hall project, which involved a mixture of ages, in 2002 her first graders accom-

plished nothing less than establishing a wetlands and building a 400-foot trail to it, using a similar service-learning grant. “By building the trail we made the wetlands into an outdoor classroom accessible to all.”

These first graders made phone calls, wrote letters and presented their plans to the principal and others. “Even at this young age,” insists Napolitano-Romer, “children want nothing more than to be heard, to be active, to help out.”

THINKING BIG

If first graders can do that, what couldn’t eighth graders do? Sue Pac’s answer is “nothing.” In 1994, five of her eighth graders at Powdermill School in Southwick, Mass., decided to build a rail-trail. “This project was their choice and became their passion,” says Pac.

The five kids, enrolled in a program for gifted students, generated the ideas and did the work, including research, recruiting volunteers, conducting meetings, creating presentations and applying for permits and grants. They became the experts, even conducting a course for other potential student trail builders at the annual state Middle School Trails Congress.

When completed, the six-mile Southwick Rail Trail that Emily, Tom, Kassia, Mitch and Melissa designed will

A “FORCE” TO BE RECKONED WITH

Educators and others working with kids say their “ownership” of a project is essential to its success. The ultimate example of that is Earth Force, a national, nonprofit organization that offers training, resources and support for a broad range of kids’ projects with civic and environmental impact. Formed in the mid-1990s by The Pew Charitable Trusts, Earth Force (www.earthforce.org) is a corporation shaped by and for young people.

Earth Force’s advisory board is all kids. The “YAB,” as they call it (Youth Advisory Board), helps design all Earth Force projects and processes. The board of directors has four youth members, drawn from the YAB. Currently two of the directors are 14 and 15.

“In other organizations, adults create programs that are delivered to kids,” says Vince Meldrum of Earth Force’s Washington, D.C., headquarters. “In Earth Force, the programs are designed by kids.” Most organizations, for example, take kids to a trail and tell them what needs to be cleaned up, says Meldrum. “In an Earth Force project, we take the kids to the trail and have them describe the problem and find solutions. They may clean up the trash as part of what they do, but their goal is to create a sustainable change.”

Local YAB member Sam Doan, age 14, has been involved with Earth Force since sixth grade. Here’s her description of the influence Earth Force has had on her life.



“Why would you disregard the convenience of a car and instead ride a bike to school?” my friend, an Earth Force group facilitator, asked. I was in sixth grade at the time and my mind went blank. Little did I know that within a year I would not only prefer

riding my bike to school but also be able to explain what makes a safe bike route. I had just joined the local Earth Force Youth Advisory Board in Erie, Pa., and that conversation with my facilitator was my first real taste of the fulfilling work that lay ahead of me.

Our local project was part of a national Earth Force campaign called “Get Out Spoke’n.” The aim was to educate people about the importance of bike riding as it pertains to the environment. Almost immediately, I had to get comfortable with researching and giving speeches to crowds, facilitating workshops, answering questions and, even more important, asking questions about environmental issues.

I didn’t have all the answers by the time the campaign ended, but I was transformed. I held a power I could identify only as

strength from new knowledge. The ultimate goal of Earth Force is to help young people attain power, strength and knowledge so they can change the world around them for the good. Environmental stewardship is a goal young people can adopt and pursue their entire lives.

connect to the Farmington Valley Greenway in the south and to a new Westfield town trail in the north.

In 2003, nine years after the Powdermill School project began, construction of the Southwick Rail Trail will start. The five students, now in college, already have left a legacy to their region. "The corridor is beautiful," says Pac, "and will give people access to areas of historical interest."

At least one of the students—in fact, Pac's son—will be carrying on the trail work directly. He is pursuing a degree in civil engineering and plans to work on a rail-trail as his junior-year practicum.

CHANGING THE WORLD

After all is said and done, kids love having fun. San Francisco-based Trips for Kids (TFK), a nonprofit organization with branches around the country, considers fun the foundation of its programs, which involve getting inner-city kids out riding on trails. The program is based on the idea that the urban and natural worlds are separated more by attitude than miles. TFK (www.tripsforkids.org) uses bicycles, especially on rail-trails, to bridge that gap.

"We use the mountain bike as a way to get the kids outside. Rail-trails are perfect for our kinds of activities," points out Corry Wagner, TFK communications director. Rick McFerren, who runs the Minneapolis TFK chapter, regularly uses rail-trails, such as the Minnehaha, the Heritage and the 29th Street Greenway, to "connect kids to the natural landscape and a world beyond their concrete environment."

Mike Bilcsik, an organizer and trail builder with the Rivers of Steel National Heritage area in Pittsburgh, started the Southwestern Pennsylvania Trips for Kids in early 2002 with funding help from the Henry A. Jordan, M.D. Preservation Excellence Fund of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. His plan was to bring the benefits of trails to more people, through kids. And it's working. "In my first year, I had more volunteers than children in the program," he says.

Most of these urban kids had never seen a deer in the wild. Some had never left their neighborhood. The rail-trails and Trips for Kids show them more than just new scenery. To these kids, ages 10 to 17, it's like a Lewis and Clark expedition.

An unexpected benefit of Bilcsik's program is the profound effect it has had on some of the kids. One kid had been doing poorly in school but now is doing well, a change his teacher attributes directly to the biking program. Another small boy "had lots of problems. He was over-active. After just three or four rides, he told the ride leader that this had been the best summer of his entire life."

Bilcsik says, "These kids obey the rules better than kids in general. They have to stay in line if they want to go on another ride, and they live for this stuff. It's scary—we're their only shot."

Rachel Carson said that "the years of early childhood are the time to prepare the soil" for learning and growth.

She contended that "once the emotions have been aroused," learning about the object of the emotions is natural. As these programs and projects show, kids and trails can form a natural partnership, ultimately to the benefit of both.

Ed Hensley can often be found prolonging his childhood by riding his bike in the Sierra Nevada foothills near Sacramento, Calif.



A Lesson That Lasts a Lifetime

Kassia Randzio, one of the students who started a rail-trail while in Sue Pac's class at Powdermill School in Southwick, Mass., now is in college. Here's what she has to say about the experience.

"When we started the rail-trail project in seventh grade, I knew it would be a long process, but I really had no clue what was ahead for me—lobbying at the statehouse, leading presentations at town meetings, writing grant proposals. I just thought it was a neat idea to be part of building a rail-trail, but the positive results mean real changes in my community. The erosion caused by ATVs will be eliminated, there won't be any more illegal dumping on the corridor, people who come to use the trail will stop at local businesses, elderly people will have a safe place to walk, everyone can exercise on the path; these are all effects of the trail that I never considered at the outset.

"I learned amazing life skills when I had an idea for a trail, shared it with the people who could help me make it a reality, and then took the steps to make it happen. The rail-trail project showed me that I can have an impact on my community if I have an idea and believe in it enough to do something about it.

"Even though I am much less involved with the project since I left Southwick, it is still a part of me. Riding my bike on the rail-trail near my college, I often imagine what the Southwick corridor will be like when it's finished. I like to think that I'll take my kids there someday and tell them how it all started."