

Golf Course is Nature's Classroom

By Shelagh Donoghue, Wilmette Park District

For more than six years the Wilmette Golf Course has served as an outdoor classroom and community project cooperative that has involved hundreds of scouts and students ranging from fourth grade through high school. Along the way, it has attracted grants and awards for efforts to preserve the environment for the native plants and wildlife that call the golf course home.

At 106 acres, the 18-hole Wilmette Golf Course is the largest single piece of land owned and operated by the Wilmette Park District. The golf course was purchased by the park district in 1972 from Northwestern University amidst legal battles about the value of the property and community fears of massive subdivision development of the site. Community groups and residents mobilized to lobby for preservation of the open land, forming a committee that backed a tax referendum to purchase the golf course. The referendum was overwhelmingly approved (5,704 to 785), and the park district acquired the site.

Jumping ahead to 1996, the Wilmette Golf Course became part of the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary System (ACSS). This national program launched the course's involvement in projects designed to enhance habitat for wildlife on the golf course and protect natural resources for the benefit of the local community. Early projects undertaken at the golf course included placing nesting boxes that had been constructed by New Trier High School students for cavity-nesting birds such as bluebirds and swallows.

Students from the high school's Environmental Science program also began an analysis of the water quality at the golf course and surrounding areas. "We wanted to increase the awareness and understanding of our golfers in the area of wildlife and environmental quality on the golf course," said Golf Course Superintendent Mike Matchen, who has coordinated the park district's efforts. "We also wanted to let the public know the golf course can be a valuable resource," he added.

Matchen shifted the golf course to a policy of spot application of herbicides and began to use integrated pest management techniques, conserve water, and work to maintain food and cover for wildlife. Among the volunteers to join Matchen's efforts were Zack Lazar, a retired biology teacher and founder of New Trier High School's environmental science program, and Nancy Lyons Hannick, a landscape architect who assisted with plant selection for wildflower, wetlands and wildlife habitat areas at the golf course. One of the first projects undertaken was the planting of a wildflower garden, done

with the assistance of students from Central School in Wilmette.

The park district's efforts caught the eyes and imagination of a local Girl Scout leader, who was an environmental planner, and her Cadette Troop which was looking for a project to achieve its Silver Award. The troop proposed a pond restoration project at the golf course aimed at improving water quality, wildlife habitats and aesthetics by planting native Illinois wetland and prairie plants along the banks of three ponds and two flood plain areas.

Before long, experts from several state, federal and private organizations were working with the 12 Girl Scouts and Matchen to take water and soil samples, determine bank slopes and grading requirements, map the underwater contours of the ponds, select appropriate plant species and identify wildlife on the site. The park district received a \$20,000 grant from Friends of the Chicago River for the demonstration project which was awarded under an Illinois Environmental Protection Agency Water Quality Improvement Grant. Volunteer hours, park district funds and staff time covered the remaining costs in the estimated \$40,000 community partnership venture.

The stream bank stabilization project culminated in the spring of 1998 with a planting day at the golf course which involved an estimated 200 girl scouts of all ages from local public and parochial schools. The scouts worked in shifts throughout the day to plant wetland and prairie plants grown in greenhouses all winter. The girls also built and painted educational signs showing the plants used and the scope of the project. The signs were permanently installed at each of the three ponds and two flood plains. The painting was overseen by the Wilmette Junior High School Art Club.

By the time the project was completed, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Natural Resource Conservation Service, the Chicago Botanic Gardens, the Northern Cook County Soil and Water Conservation District, Cook County Forest Preserve District, Lake County's Lake Management Program and Skokie Country Club's Golf Course had all contributed time and expertise. The project won recognition from the North Cook County Soil and Water Conservation District, and Matchen was honored by the Friends of the Chicago River for "developing bold new ideas and translating them into reality, seeing opportunities in barriers, and promoting community participation through stewardship."

Continued partnerships with the Friends of the Chicago River and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services have made it

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possible for the park district to host an "Education Day" every year since 1999. The program, attended by local fourth and sixth grade students, uses the golf course ponds and woodlands as an environmental studies classroom. EcoWatch from Oakton Community College also joined forces with the park district to make the activities possible.

Fourth grade students from Harper School helped get the development of a nature center off the ground. During three visits to the golf course during different seasons, the students worked with volunteer Zach Lazar, who is serving as the golf course's education coordinator for the Audubon Certification Program. The students participated in log decomposition studies, determined tree ages based on counting trunk rings, and observed and cataloged animal, plant and insect life. Their activities culminated in the park district's first "Education Day."

To make the Education Day safe and productive, the golf course shuts down completely so students can move freely about the course, taking water samples from the ponds and studying animal life around the ponds. They learn to identify insects and wildlife in their natural wetlands habitat along the North Branch of the Chicago River and in the woods that surround the golf course. The students rotate through four work stations focused on ponds, streams, wetlands and a nature area, performing specific tasks, taking notes and recording their findings. They are also treated to a cookout for lunch.

Letters from students who have participated in the day's activities reflect how much they learned from the experience. "I learned that a wetland needs water, hydric soil, and plants," wrote one student. "The soil is very different from other soils, it has little areas of orange spots because of the iron, and as you get deeper, there's more orange and light gray." Another student wrote, "I learned that you can tell how polluted water is by what bugs live in it."

Although Education Day 2002 was cancelled due to concern over the spread of West Nile Virus, plans are in place for this year's event to take place September 2. Through the development of effective conservation and wildlife enhancement programs, the park district continues to work toward becoming a Certified Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary while enjoying many professional partnerships and community-building opportunities.

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park district will be adding brochures later this summer for self-guided tours. A big part of the interpretive trail is an Environmental Teaching Circle. This educational area will hold up to 80 students and includes a 6-foot fire pit. In addition to outdoor classes, scouts will be allowed to camp overnight with park district approval, according to Mitchell. "There are not a lot of places close by for them to do this," he said.

Financially, the Nature Center and nature programs are funded through donations and program fees. Although the park district has to supplement an extra \$35,000 to operate the center, it's worth it, according to park district officials. "Obviously we are trying to make the Nature Center stand on its own financially," says Steven Karoliussen, the district's Superintendent of Revenue Facilities. "But it's a great public relations tool which makes it worth subsidizing."

Mitchell admits that he tried to get a number of park districts to buy into the idea of extensive nature programming and a nature center. "Bartlett was the only one to take me up on this idea," Mitchell said. It gave him a great outlet for his collection of animals and animal artifacts that he has been gathering for more than ten years. He also brought in his huge book collection, which is used as a resource library for residents. "Sometimes students, or even parents, need information on an animal. We have a great resource right here."

Of course, space is an issue and Mitchell said a bigger facility is probably years down the road. He's quick to point out that a big facility isn't always necessary. "Even if a park district doesn't have a nature center, they can still do nature programs," he said. As for starting a nature center, "It started slowly," says Mitchell "but looking at what we have now you can see it snowballs. And it's been fun and exciting."

