

GATEWAY REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

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First graders study with Arcadia Wildlife educator

Huntington – First grade students at Littleville Elementary School had some extra help and hands-on experience in their science studies this year, with regular visits from Lara Tate Beltran, an environmental educator with Arcadia Wildlife Sanctuary.

Starting in mid-January and running through mid-May, Beltran visited the classrooms of first grade teachers Jennifer Bak and Catherine Moriarty, who worked with her to plan hands-on activities in the classroom and outdoors that would enhance the science curriculum. Their studies included signs of the seasons, how animals cope with winter, what changes in daylight mean for the weather, for animal behavior and for plant growth, animal tracks in snow and mud, and general observations about wildlife over time. Students kept their own journals to record their observations and learning.

Funded by a \$2,500 STARS (Students and Teachers working with Artists, Scientists and Scholars) Residency Grant from the Massachusetts Cultural Council, the project included nine hour-long visits to each classroom, plus a field trip to Arcadia and ending in a family picnic at Littleville in late May, where students shared their journals and learning with families and friends. The Massachusetts Cultural Council is a state agency that funds educational and cultural activities in schools and communities.

"First grade has been going to Arcadia for years," noted first grade teacher Jennifer Bak. "This year, when we got off the bus, students were waving and yelling out the bus windows, 'Ms. Beltran! Ms. Beltran!'"

"That brought our learning full circle," Bak added. "She had been coming to us and now we were seeing her where she works each day. The kids were very excited!"

Beltran has been an environmental educator for 30 years, working with Arcadia for the last two years. Most of her work has been with non-profits, county and state government.

On a dreary day in early May, Beltran had students describe what they had worked on together during the last visit. It has focused on birds and students had listened to birdcalls and created bird nests. This visit, held on Friday, May 11, was focused on the plants that we eat and included the different parts of plants that are eaten by humans. Students reached blindly into a paper bag to feel an item and try to guess what it was, and what part of a plant it was. The first item was celery, which is a stem; the second bag had spinach, which is a leaf; the third had broccoli (flowers) and the fourth had a carrot (root). The fifth bag contained sunflower seeds, which are how we grow new plants the following year.

Beltran explained that water comes up into the plant from the root, up the stem to the leaves (which absorb sunshine and help plants grow), then up to the flowers, which produce seeds that fall on the soil and start a new plant. Students then received different flowers and drew them in their journals, then looked at the same item under a magnifying glass and drew a close-up of its patterns.

“Laura did a wonderful job working with our students,” said teacher Catherine Moriarty. “She truly understood how to make science engaging through a variety of activities, such as puppet shows and having the students pretend to walk like animals. They looked forward to Laura’s visits over the ten sessions.”

In late May, students traveled to Arcadia where they toured the grounds and took part in numerous scientific activities, including observing wildlife in their natural habitat.

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Photo: Quinn B. (front) and Logan M. on the run through Arcadia Wildlife Sanctuary. (Photo by Arcadia photographer Phil Doyle). For more photos, please visit the Gateway website (www.grsd.org).