

Friends School Gets Their GOAT Quaker Ideals Inspire Environmental Stewardship



photo by Jaimie Lang

Third- and fourth-graders show off their harvest of greens. With donated starts from Progressive Gardens and Black River Organic Farm, students grow organic vegetables; they in turn donate the harvest to Good Shepherd ministries for distribution to the area's hungry.

by Karen Linehan, Jaimie Lang, Jody Ellis and Susan Turner

It's four o'clock on a cold, January afternoon. All of the students have gone home for the day. Around the corner from the school's front door, a small group of teachers surveys a scruffy plot of grass and exposed soil. Even in the chilly wind, the teachers are smiling as they look beyond the dormant landscape. Coming soon to this location is the next project of GOAT (Green Outdoor Adventure Team), a faculty committee at Friends School of Wilmington. Working with students and parent volunteers, GOAT hopes to transform this little patch of grass and dirt into a verdant garden of delights for birds and other wildlife.

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Although native gardens are at the top of the list at Friends School, GOAT is following an ambitious agenda of other green initiatives and adventure programs. As part of the school's "5-Year Strategic Plan," the committee is evaluating everything from eco-friendly control of fire ants to reusable dishware and green cleaning products. With an adventure playground

already in place, GOAT is also planning a low ropes course and fitness trails around the grounds. In addition, the committee is expanding the school's longtime camping program and dreams of establishing an educational working farm with chickens and goats (the inspiration for the project's acronym).

And GOAT is motivated by more than a strategic plan and an earnest work ethic. Infusing each project are the Quaker values upon which the school is founded: simplicity, peace, integrity, community service, equality, and stewardship of resources. "Getting children outside so they can experience the natural world is a major goal of our Quaker curriculum," explains art teacher Sharon Ely. "This helps children develop an intimate feeling of belonging in nature, and ultimately encourages environmental stewardship, appreciation of beauty, and the ability to find joy in the simplest of things." Carson, in the first grade, agrees. "My favorite thing is watching the bluebirds flying back and forth from a tree and down to their nest."

Committee decisions are reached through consensus. Projects are deeply

collaborative, with an emphasis on building relationships between the school and the Wilmington community. All students, from kindergarten through eighth grade, participate in weekly service work that begins at school and extends into local communities and the world.

Established in 1994, Friends School has grown to include two campuses (Peiffer and Pine Grove) on eight combined acres.

Over the years, teachers, students, and parents have worked together to create and enhance native habitats for wildlife and learning. Students don't have to travel far to experience the life cycles of butterflies and frogs, observe bluebirds caring for young, discover earwigs in a rotten log pile, and smell the crushed leaves of wax myrtle. The students love this proximity: "I've gotten closer to worms, caterpillars, and butterflies," says second-grader Charlotte. Preschool teacher and Division Head of School Jane Lawrence notices this, too. "In the morning on the way into school, young children pull their parents to the plants along the sidewalk and excitedly show them a flower or bug," says Lawrence. "With heads bent together, they are fully experiencing this wondrous ecosystem."

GOAT hopes to develop outdoor learning environments where children can experience the natural world every day at school. Each classroom adopts several garden areas to study and cultivate—and even to learn in. Art students draw inspiration from the native bog garden that surrounds a pergola-covered classroom, Spanish and music classes are often taught

outside where students enjoy fresh air and sunshine. "Unless it is too wet, windy or cold, classes meet every day in our new outdoor studio," says Ely.

In order to sustain gardens and build community partnerships, GOAT supports local businesses and often receives donations of plants and landscape materials. In turn, the gardens give back tenfold as they inspire student learning, conserve wildlife and native plants, and feed students and others in the Wilmington area.

Examples of ongoing stewardship are found at every grade level. Preschool and kindergarten students deposit lunch scraps in classroom worm bins and add the rich vermicompost to backdoor flower and herb gardens. First- and second-grade

ers manage a butterfly garden and plant milkweed as a nectar and host plant for Monarch butterflies. Taylor, in second grade, sums up the program with elegant simplicity: "I like to plant milkweed for the monarchs so that they can live." This year the milkweed was locally grown by Shelton Herb Farm, Growing Wild Nursery, and the Ability Garden at New Hanover County Arboretum.

Fifth- and sixth-grade students conduct research and nurture saltmarsh plant seedlings in a school yard nursery for the NC Coastal Federation's Student Wetland Nursery Program. Students work with the Federation to plant the seedlings at shoreline restoration sites along the coast. "Students from the Friends School have planted over 7,500 plants during their involvement with this program", stated the Federation's coastal education coordinator and biologist Ted Wilgis. "The teachers, students and school are incredibly enthusiastic and dedicated to local environmental stewardship."

With seedlings donated from local businesses, third- and fourth-graders tend organic vegetables; the resulting harvest helps feed the area's hungry (see photo). Seventh- and eighth-graders focus on water and soil conservation, maintaining several rain gardens on campus that help minimize stormwater runoff.

In addition to community donations, grant funding from local and state organizations such as Cape Fear Garden Club and NC Beautiful have also supported garden development at Friends School.

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photo by Daniel Kay

GOAT organizers strive to get the students outdoors every day. Surrounded by trees, grass, and sunshine, these fifth- and sixth-graders are learning to find their place in nature.

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It's four o'clock on a warm, spring afternoon. All of the students have gone home for the day, their hands and clothes a little dirtier than when they arrived at school this morning. Thanks to their hard work, Friends School has a new garden habitat for birds. The students have planted American beautyberry, "hearts a'bustin," and dwarf palmetto to provide fall berries for songbirds. Crossvine, penstemon, coral honeysuckle and columbine will offer spring nectar for hummingbirds. Most important, the school's gardens will cultivate life-long connections between children, wildlife, and the world around them. It is the dream of GOAT, and Friends School of Wilmington community, that these simple gifts from the garden will inspire a new generation of environmental and community stewards.

Karen Linehan, Jaimie Lang, Jody Ellis and Susan Turner are all enthusiastic teachers and members of GOAT.

Learn more about Friends School of Wilmington and its programs at www.fsow.org or call (910)791-8221 or toll free at (888)644-3769.



photo by Jaimie Lang

Fourth-grader Jessica plants a native columbine in the bird garden; its nectar is a valuable food source for hummingbirds.