

Giving children the power

Mary Norton teaches environmental awareness, opportunities to kids

By ANNE PHILLIPS
Courier Staff Writer

CEDAR FALLS

For Cedar Falls teacher Mary Norton, education is just beginning when students walk out the classroom door.

Norton, a sixth-grade teacher at North Cedar Elementary School, spearheaded the development of a three-acre, student-centered outdoor education habitat at the school more than a decade ago. Since that time, she's worked to involve all North Cedar students in environmental education, and has actively spread the word about the importance of environmental stewardship throughout the country.

Norton uses environmental education to help children understand that knowledge brings both opportunity and responsibility, says State Rep. Bill Witt, who profiled Norton in the fall issue of *The Iowan* magazine.

"One of the things that has most impressed me about the way she goes to work with her students, is that she puts this into practice," Witt says. "She lets her students make decisions, act, and then take responsibility for the results of those decisions."

Dr. Daryl Smith, professor of biology at the University of Northern Iowa, said the North Cedar prairie was one of the earliest of its kind developed at an elementary school.

"I think the uniqueness that Mary really adds to it is that she really utilizes it," Smith said.

A New Hartford native, Norton attributes much of her interest in the environment to her father, Martin Holm, who died in April. As a farmer interested in protecting the environment, he planted hundreds of trees on his farm and was concerned about the impact of modern farming practices on the land.

Today, Norton and her husband, Jim, an engineer, live on land once owned by her father. Piece by piece, the Nortons are slowly returning hundreds of acres to native prairie.

Mary Norton began her teaching career at an inner-city Milwaukee elementary school. There, in 1972, aided by a grant from the Schlitz Brewery, she helped her students turn an abandoned courtyard littered with debris into a garden area that featured native Wisconsin plants. The garden still flourishes today.

The Nortons returned to Iowa in 1974. Mary joined the staff at North Cedar and set her sights on a patch of unused land near the building. With the support of staff, and borrowing the expertise of Daryl Smith, Norton developed a proposal to begin returning the area to native prairie.

"I thought at the time that I was interested in developing a place for people to go and study," she says. Since then, I've realized the process is more important than the end result, just getting the kids involved."

In 1993, Norton packaged that process for use by others in "Project LS: Land Stewardship/Lifestyle Decisions," an Iowa-specific curriculum. Project LS includes a video and manual that helps educators guide their students through the intricacies and importance of the prairie, the wetlands and the woodlands.



BRANDON POLLOCK / Courier Staff Photographer

Cedar Falls teacher Mary Norton and sixth-grade mentor Shannon McMurrin, standing at rear, help Kara Preece, right, and Rene Danner identify trees in North Cedar Elementary School's outdoor education habitat. McMurrin nominated Norton for her recent honor as the first Iowa recipient of the Educators Environmental Award from the United States Environmental Protection Agency.

New plans for site destroyed by 1993 flooding

By ANNE PHILLIPS

CEDAR FALLS — The flood waters that ravaged the North Cedar area two years ago have long since subsided.

But the lessons are just beginning.

The floods of 1993 virtually destroyed a three-acre outdoor education habitat at North Cedar Elementary School, with the exception of half an acre of woodland planted on a hillside.

"The water stood for two years," reflects sixth-grade teacher Mary Norton. "It was hard on the children, it was a real tragedy. They kept saying 'It will come back,' because in all the studies, it shows prairies can take a lot. But these upland species couldn't take standing in water for that long. We waited for two years to see if any could come back, but it couldn't. The children kept looking, and just around the edges there were a few Big Bluestem grasses. That

was all that survived."

And the fate of the outdoor habitat had some equally tragic parallels.

"Many children lost their homes out here," Norton recalls. "And we talked about before we planted that prairie, we should have studied the environmental history of that land, and we would have planted wetland species. They immediately connected with that, that before someone builds, or is allowed to build, the environmental history, the habitat connected to that land is really relevant. They'll remember that."

But the 1995-96 school year will mark many new beginnings at North Cedar Elementary School.

This spring the school received a state Integrated Vegetation Roadside Management grant that will be used to replant and reconstruct the prairie.

And the Cedar Falls Schools and North Cedar Elementary have

received a \$50,000 grant from the Roy J. Carver Charitable Trust that will fund an information resource center to assist students in the reconstruction efforts, including new computers, printers, software and access to the Internet that will connect them with arboreturns and centers of expertise around the country.

The grant was written by a committee of Cedar Falls teachers, including North Cedar fifth-grade teacher Katherine Beebe.

This spring, the remnants of the prairie planted in 1983 will be burned, and the area will be replanted.

Norton says that instead of the Big Bluestem, Little Bluestem and Sideoats Grama planted 11 years ago, the students will return to school this summer to help plant Prairie Cordgrass and a variety of slow plants more suited to the wetland environment.

The Nortons' son, Jay, now a graduate student in agronomy at Iowa State University, Ames, was co-author and producer for Project LS. Daughter Jill, who teaches in Peru, lent a hand with the manual illustrations.

Norton estimates that 5,000 sets of Project LS have been distributed in the U.S. and Canada. The handbook will be updated and republished this fall.

Back in their North Cedar classrooms, Norton's sixth-grade students regularly mentor kindergarteners through fifth-graders, developing their own lesson plans based on their own knowledge of the environment and the outdoor habitat itself.

"I don't make any decisions here," Norton says. "I can do that at home. Here, they have the power."

And, no stranger to awards, Norton has just received another honor. Last month she was named the first Iowa winner of the Educators Environmental Award from the United States Environmental Protection Agency, adding to honors already received from the Iowa Wildlife Federation, the Sierra Club, the Iowa Department of Education, the Gold Star Awards program and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.

"My main goal is to emphasize the

interdependency of life cycles," Norton explains. "Interdependency is a focused element of every lesson that we take out to mentor, or that I work with the children on in Project LS. We need to understand those interdependencies — and the beauty of diversity."

"That's the story to be told out there in the habitat, and I hope that they leave understanding that."

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