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Labyrinth laboring: Students create unique structure at GCO

Written by Rachel Ham Sunday, 20 January 2013 20:40



Measuring in at 27 feet wide and 35 feet long, there's a new, permanent addition to the campus at Gray Court-Owings Elementary. Needing an army to help her complete the structure, artist and educator Beth Langley said her small helpers were vital to bringing the creation to life.

"We couldn't have done it without 'kid power'," she agreed.

Armed with a vision, Langley arrived at GCO on Monday ready to start work on <u>vet another labyrinth</u>, or a maze-like structure. Although the task was completed by week's end, the journey to bring this unique, larger-than-life project to fruition was several years in the making.

"This has been a 5-year dream of ours," agreed GCO Upper Elementary Montessori teacher Linda Brashier.

After meeting nearly two decades ago during Montessori training, Brashier and Langley became great friends and kept in touch to share classroom activities and ideas. When Langley started traveling and creating labyrinths, both around the Upstate and around the world, Brashier knew that GCO had to have one of its own. Following five years of fundraising by the Montessori team, planning out the labyrinth's location, and soliciting materials, everything fell into place this term.

"We were so happy to have Beth with us helping to construct our original design," Brashier said.

Hours of labor by Upper Montessori students, parent volunteers and GCO staff and about 50 tons of materials later, the labyrinth is a fixture at the school. Langley said it's comprised of 40 tons of crusher run, 10 tons of riprap (a type of rock used to create barriers) and two pallets of river stone – and a lot of fun times with the students.

"We've had quite an adventure building it," she said. "These are wonderful kids, and they've done so much work."



Before getting out the shovels and buckets to spread the crusher run or gloves to place the river stones, students learned a little more about what makes labyrinths so unique. Langley also shared labyrinth facts and figures with Montessori parents at a weekly community meeting on Friday before inviting them outdoors to check out students' hard work.

Often compared to mazes, labyrinths are more like a cousin of those puzzles. While mazes feature dead ends and wrong ways, a labyrinth has a single path that goes to its center. Usually, the beginning is also the way out, but some designs feature a separate entrance and exit. Like those made from hay or cornfields, mazes are designed to confuse – but labyrinths are simply for fun and relaxation even though they, too, have twists and turns.

"You just follow the path," Langley said.

In the classroom, the Montessori teams learned from Langley about the history and formation of labyrinths. Prior to mapping out the large creation outside, the students drew their own miniature ones using math skills. With so many variations possible, the classes could imagine any design they wished as long as the points and paths lined up correctly.

"It takes a lot of brain activity and concentration," Langley added.

Built throughout history, labyrinths can been found today at schools, hospitals, in large gardens or parks, and other places where people can benefit from a leisurely walk of self-reflection. Langley said she has seen many people enjoy traveling to the center of a labyrinth, taking their mind off of their problems and often finding a solution to a pressing issue by doing so. She's also built them for companies looking to unite their workforce.

"You can use them for fun, balance, community building, creativity and more," she said. "The good thing about them is that they take working and walking together."

Teamwork was certainly important at GCO as the Upper Montessori classes went outdoors to turn the plan on paper into a community labyrinth. Wanting to evoke the right message, Langley and Brashier decided on a design based around a turtle shape. Fittingly, the creature sits on the edge of the school property, alongside the bus driveway, adjacent to a nearby pond.

"Turtles are symbols of wisdom, shelter and abundance," Langley explained. "It's also part of the school's theme of taking care of the earth."



By the shovelful, handful and bucketful, crusher run was spread out to form the turtle's rounded shell while students used wheelbarrow after wheelbarrow of riprap to outline the shell and create the turtle's feet and head. Colored river stones were then carefully placed to trace the labyrinth path – and two were saved for the turtle's eyes. Fourth grader Haleigh Tomlin couldn't believe how the piles of materials turned into such an unusual project.

"It took a lot of crusher run to make the shell," she recalled.

The teams of workers had to brave the elements on a few occasions, and Langley was impressed with the students' work ethic.

"They were out there in the wind and rain," she said.

The tired arms and muddy shoes are certainly worth it now. Boasting a completed labyrinth, GCO has a must-see spot that can be not only used for meditation or exercise but also be viewed from high above.

"We will be able to see our turtle on Google Earth if they ever fly over and take an updated picture of the school," Langley agreed.

"Now we can come out and walk it anytime," Tomlin added.

Before getting into the final stages of the project, Montessori students of all ages took a break from their classroom studies to gather around the labyrinth and sing their new favorite tune, the "Turtle Song". Brashier added that the Montessori teams plan to organize schoolwide events at the labyrinth so that all classes can share in the excitement.

Gray Court-Owings Elementary would like to thank Vulcan Materials Company, Tommy Leopard and Kevin Bagwell for their donations of time and materials. For more information on using the labyrinth, call 876-2131.





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