

IslandWood:

**“A School in the Woods” blossoms
into an internationally known local treasure...**

By Laura S. Liming

In its first official year in operation, the internationally recognized Environmental Learning Center on Bainbridge Island has made huge strides toward realizing the founders' goal of inspiring environmental and community stewardship by providing hands-on learning experiences in science, technology and the arts.

The most immediately noticeable change being that the organization, formerly known as Puget Sound Environmental Learning Center changed its name. Now known as IslandWood, the center has successfully launched a program that introduces over 3,000 children each school year to the wonders of nature; teaching them to recognize their own impact on the environment, and encouraging them to contribute to their community.

In the past year, IslandWood happily bid farewell to its first class of graduate students, who left with a Certificate in Education for Environment and Community – as well as a renewed commitment to lifelong learning and a furthered sense of environmental responsibility.

In conjunction with the Graduate Program in Education currently in place, IslandWood recently joined forces with City University, (the largest private provider of certificated teaching candidates in Washington State) to provide Kitsap county residents wishing to enter the teaching profession an opportunity to study closer to home. Upon completion of the 38-credit Certificate in Education for Environment and Community offered at IslandWood students can pursue a Master In Teaching Certification at City University. Students may apply 26 of the credits earned at IslandWood and complete remaining credits at any City University campus during the following year through an intensive summer session.

Besides new programs, several aesthetic and architectural modifications have been made, augmenting the already spectacular 255-acre campus. One such addition, the “Treehouse Classroom,” has proven particularly popular with the 4th, 5th and 6th grade guests attending the four-day overnight program at IslandWood.

Created by one of the nation's leading sustainable design firms; Mithun Architects of Redmond, the grand residence is reminiscent of a mystical castle. Centered around an ancient Douglas Fir Tree with a trunk roughly four feet in diameter a winding staircase with rails made of reclaimed branches leads to huge wooden cathedral style doors through which guests may enter. Once inside, little eyes can peek out from one of several round windows, formerly ship portholes. Barn-style double doors open to provide a spectacular view of the meadows and the bog 70 feet below. Students often visit the Treehouse in groups for quiet reflection or journaling.

Another recently added feature is the “Garden Classroom.” Funded entirely by private donations, the garden is maintained by a dedicated crew of volunteers. This most unique “classroom” gives students the chance to learn about the origins of the food they eat. Though there are not enough

vegetables in the garden to create an entire meal, IslandWood chefs make a conscious effort to utilize at least some of the garden's organic produce in the meals the children enjoy each day.

In a further effort to help students see the connection between environment and to appreciate the effect their actions have on their surroundings, students learn to weigh leftover food following mealtimes. Using an exceptionally artistic weighted scale (a flat metal statue resembling a man with outstretched arms, a scale in either hand) the students scrape leftovers off each plate, separating them into organic (plant), non-organic (animal), and liquid buckets. Each bucket is weighed to measure the amount of wasted food. The contents of the 'organic' bucket are then taken to the garden bin where they will be used as compost to help the plants grow healthier.

Just beyond the Garden Classroom is the "Living Machine." It is here that a group of approximately 10 visiting students huddle around their instructor, who is talking about the "ABC's" of the eco-system. Assisted by a graduate student, he explains the difference between Abiotic, Biotic, and Cultural elements, and the part each type of element plays within our ecosystem. The lesson is particularly compelling because it takes place in the aforementioned "Living Machine," a functioning manmade ecosystem and wastewater treatment facility that naturally cleans up to 3,000 gallons of water per day.

Housed in a structure similar to a gigantic greenhouse, water from various areas of the administrative building filters in through special pipes, continues through a series of plant-filled vats that absorb vitamins and minerals, flows through a small waterfall purified by the sun through solar panels on the roof of the structure, and continues on through a purifying process mimicking that found in nature.

As one might expect, great programs are the result not only of dedicated volunteers and involved community members. Innovative programs are also the result of talented staff, with a desire to expand their own horizons, as well as those of the children they teach.

IslandWood Science Coordinator Karen Matsumoto is one such example. Last year, IslandWood was the recipient of a waterworks grant for \$34,000, which Matsumoto described as one of the highlights of her work at IslandWood. The waterworks grant allowed for teaching students the basics of water quality testing. They learned to judge the health of a stream, took inventory of stream habitat, and identified various insects surrounding the waters. Once the children were back in their own neighborhoods, they were able to perform similar tests on waterways in their own area as a community project.

"It was an example of how we can help to empower the kids, to make them feel they can make a difference," she explains.

This year, Matsumoto has been selected to collaborate on an unprecedented pilot project created by Evergreen State College scientist, Nalini Nadkarni. The goal of the "Scientist-in-Residence" program, funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation is to create a venue that allows scientists to share their work with schoolchildren and the general public in a friendly and informal setting.

Making science more accessible to all, selected "Research Ambassadors" will live onsite at the IslandWood campus for one week, sharing information on their current research. They will work with 4th and 5th grade students using traditional methods of scientific inquiry, as well as non-traditional methods such as art-based research.

While there are obviously many ways that schoolchildren benefit from Kitsap County's IslandWood, there are also a number of ways for local adults and for the business community to become involved as well.

Besides the obvious route of donating dollars, which is always appreciated, business people may donate their time and their expertise.

Says Communications Director Christine Llobregat, "The business community is a great resource of skilled volunteers, and can serve as wonderful ambassadors for IslandWood." Some employees of local companies choose to work at IslandWood during community days such as the International Day of Caring, when one local company provided nearly 80 employees who spent the day removing invasive ivy and repairing landscapes.

Companies that may have particular affiliations are also encouraged to support special projects. For instance, one company in the field of archeology has provided support specifically for creating a shelter over the recently discovered geological trench found on the IslandWood grounds. The building of this shelter ensures that it will remain intact and available for incorporating into the education of future visitors.

IslandWood also offers periodic presentations open to the general public and the business community. Events held on campus this past summer included a presentation on sustainable design, as well as organic cooking classes. The Circle of Friends weekend that took place in October, provided women from the local communities an opportunity to explore their creativity and connect with other women around the theme of community stewardship. An energizing array of activities and workshops included: creative writing, painting, digital photography, African drumming, the art of storytelling, dance, non-traditional floral arranging and basketry and weaving with natural fibers. IslandWood staff hopes to continue providing special programs such as these for children and adults on an ongoing basis throughout the year.

"Tug on anything and you'll find it connected to everything else." This phrase, uttered by naturalist, writer, conservationist, and founder of the Sierra Club, John Muir, can be found in lobby of IslandWood's administration building. Indeed, it is the mission of the staff, volunteers and students of IslandWood to illustrate the reality of this phrase to all who visit the campus, and they are off to a glorious start.

Interested in more information? Check out the IslandWood website at: www.islandwood.org or schedule a tour. Multiple site tours are available throughout the month. They are tentatively the first and third Monday and Thursday of the month and the last Sunday of each month. To register for a scheduled tour or to ask questions, please email tours@islandwood.org or call (206) 855-4300. Consult website for specific details and times.

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