

News

Middle school, Warren Wilson to partner over some nature projects

BRITTANY KRASUTSKY

SPECIAL TO THE BLACK MOUNTAIN NEWS

Last fall, Warren Wilson College faculty reached out to Owen District principals to talk about how the schools be more effective partners.

"There is a lot of service happening in the local public schools and after-school programs," Annie Jonas, the college's education department chair, wrote in an email to school administrators. "However, I think our impact could be so much greater if we concentrated our efforts and attempted to address some targeted goals that schools care about."

When Warren Wilson College faculty met with the principals in December, they discussed current partnership endeavors and ways that the college's students are currently volunteering in the schools. Heidi Von Dohlen, Owen Middle School principal, said that "while traditional tutoring, reading with students, etc., is an important service to our schools, we wanted to also think outside of traditional volunteering roles."

That led her to talk about the middle school's Natural Impact Initiative, "which created a new opportunity for potential partnering," she said. Last month, college faculty and Owen principals toured the 40-plus acres at the middle school to learn more about the initiative.

Through the Natural Impact Initiative, Owen Middle School is creating a school landscape that promotes environmental stewardship, citizen science and exploratory learning. The school's goal is to connect the "digital" generation of students to their natural Appalachian heritage. The school wants its students invested in the future of the Swannanoa Valley and the world through hands-on learning.

In the past year, Owen Middle School staff and students have worked towards that goal through a variety of team events, including hours of fund-



OWEN MIDDLE SCHOOL/SPECIAL TO BMN
Owen Middle School counselor Carl Firley points out the ecological details and importance of the beaver lodge on campus.

raising, hands-on installations, field trips and coordinating with a variety of community partners. The school has created a native pollinator outdoor classroom with raised pollinator beds, pond with waterfall, outdoor seating and quilt garden. Students worked with the American Chestnut Foundation to plant an American Chestnut Germplasm Conservation orchard, designed to assist in scientific efforts to save the trees from chestnut blight. In addition, students worked with Hop'n Blueberry Farm to obtain and plant more than 30 milkweed plants and wildflowers to create a Monarch Butterfly way station.

As Owen Middle begins phase two of its Natural Impact Initiative, it has formed a partnership with The Asheville Design Center to map out other educational sites on its 40-plus acres. Some of the sites will include a platform and night vision cameras for daily observation of its beaver lodge, one of the largest in Buncombe County. Other projects include planting native river cane, building a low ropes course and an outdoor classroom.

Brittany Krasutsky is Owen Middle School's Natural Impact Initiative chairperson.