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Owen Middle phases nature onto campus

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As the sun begins to creep down the Western North Carolina sky, falling water gathers in the pool below in the pollinator habitat at Owen Middle School. Crystal clear water reflects rippled images of blueberry bushes, native trees and local flora. A once-swampy tangle of muck, algae and weeds was taped off from a community that longed for beauty and art. A pond was about to be born.

Owen Middle School has completed Phase I of the Natural Impact Initiatives Project that began in last school year as a small "green team." Members included teachers from multiple disciplines with a strong focus in science.

"We had a newly constructed school mission and vision statement that incorporated outdoor hands-on learning with staff passion for creating a new culture that embraced the students learning about their Appalachian Heritage," said Brittany Krasutsky, science teacher, and chair of the Natural Impact Initiative. The school partnered with the community to raise the \$8,000 that the first phase cost, she said.

Now, the school's first outdoor classroom and its pollinator habitat named "From Roots to Wings" is ready to use. Phase 2 will be completed during this school year and includes signage, a park bench for pollinator habitat, a second outdoor classroom, a heritage garden and a nature trail that complies with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

As the plans started to coalesce, one obstacle was becoming obvious - budget restrictions. Like most public schools across North Carolina, funds for anything outside of basic educational needs were a challenge.

"Funding for the project has climbed as Owen Middle School staff connect with generous donors in our community, and we have a lot of people to thank," Jim Cooper, a seventh-grade science teacher, said. Project organizers first reached out to the UNC Master Gardeners and to the school's annual craft fair, Christmas in the Valley. Both gave generously, Cooper said.

"After that, the word spread, and funding started trickling in," he said. Businesses, organizations, and individuals like Mosaic Community Lifestyle Realty, Black Mountain Rotary Club, Michael Harrin, the school's PTO, Grey Beard Realty, Wendell Begley, Kiwanis Foundation (via OMS Builder's Club), Christ Community Church and school parents, faculty, and staff "started breathing life into an otherwise hopeless project with donations and volunteer hours," Cooper said.

After a landscape architect, Eric Edwards of Edwards Landscaping, was hired, plans were drawn up that included a waterfall, raised beds for native pollinators (plants that attract bees and other pollinating insects) and a neatly groomed walkway with pavers and gravel.

"These plans were the start of a huge project to bring new life to an old, worn-down pond," Xander Hall, a seventh-grade student, said.

"The plants that will be planted around our pond are native to the Swannanoa Valley and reflect our rich history," student Nate Senna said.

Community volunteers helped students from OMS Builders Club, STEAM Club and YMCA afterschool program build raised beds, plant the native plant species and spread mulch. As the project progressed, the help of all the volunteers and experts became essential.

The building of the waterfall was left to the pros because the defunct pond had to be removed with heavy machinery. Working in and around the students, Steve Haun from TanBark created a special feature that was added to the campus. The waterfall is not only elegant; it also serves as the cornerstone for a thriving ecosystem. According to seventh grader Zeb Lord, "It's like Niagara

Falls. Downsize it by a little, and we have a world wonder in our courtyard."

"The waterfall is beautiful and makes any average middle school day better," student Mikayla Roseman said.

"Every time I walk outside, I can feel the radiant beauty of the pond. I feel blessed to be a part of this great project," student Sofia Swoap said.

With the waterfall complete and fully operational, phase one of the initiative is completed. The campus at Owen Middle School now invites wonder, relaxation and pollination. A beautiful quilt garden mixes nature and heritage, fledgling American Chestnut Trees flourish as the germplasm orchard takes root and the pollinator beds surrounding the waterfall invite not only students but also essential wildlife to support the Valley ecosystem.

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Owen Middle School has a native pollinator classroom as a result of phase 1 of the Natural Impact Initiative Project. Students were an integral part of making it a reality. BRITTANY KRASUTSKY/SPECIAL TO THE BLACK MOUNTAIN NEWS