

The Greening of an Eckington School

BY AMANDA ABRAMS

No garden looks its best under a layer of snow. Scratch that: no garden looks great in winter, period. Especially when there's a chilly wind blowing, and waves of cold are emanating from the pavement. So I admit I probably wasn't fully appreciating the gardens surrounding the Emery Education Campus for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics on a recent Saturday morning visit: I was too busy trying to remember why I hadn't thought to put on a woolly sweater and two layers of socks before leaving the house.

In contrast, Ted McGinn, my guide, seemed downright sprightly as he bounced from plot to plot. McGinn lives just down the street from the school, which is in Eckington (at 1720 First St. NE, a couple blocks east of Bloomingdale) and has been instrumental in the school's transformation.

It's not necessarily the greatest looking facility – the building was once a bathhouse catering to the inhabitants of nearby boarding houses and is still fronted by a loading dock – so the addition of flowers, shrubs and trees is a very welcome one. At least, that's what I was picturing. In deep February, it takes a leap of the imagination to turn bare branches into leaf-covered ones, and to envision sprawling tomato and okra and zucchini plants in what's otherwise a rather drab scene. But I took McGinn's word for it as he walked me around the grounds.

McGinn has been helping out at Emery since 2000, when his daughter was a student at the school. Back then, there wasn't much green space or color on the campus, so he initiated a small garden project for one of his daughter's classes. Add in City Year volunteers with whom McGinn

was becoming friendly, and he wound up with a project that blossomed, so to speak, into something much bigger.

"It kept growing and growing," he said. "We had this great September community service day, and 300 volunteers showed up. They started digging garden plots behind the school." The soil, it turned out, was "pure clay," but with the help of City Year volunteers, McGinn located free city-donated topsoil and trucked it in. And little by little, budding gardeners and their City Year helpers turned just about every vacant spot into a plot where plants could grow.

The result? The front of the school is peppered with small plots for basil, beans, peppers, zinnias, sunflowers and more. In back, there's a long fenced-in stretch with more beds, heaps of compost and brush, a butterfly garden planted with perennials and native plants, and an open area that McGinn uses as an outdoor classroom. Most of the materials used to ring the various plots were scavenged – wood from an old picnic table is used to contain the main compost pile, and one of the front gardens is edged with marble blocks that were formerly part of McKinley Tech High School, which is next door.

McGinn, who is senior manager of the Bloomingdale Farmers' Market and works at Big Bear Café, says gardens are a great place for hands-on learning. Three days a week, he's out there talking to students about the phenomena around them. "It's inquiry-based learning," he says. "Classes always start with a question, then the kids can explore together."

McGinn likes to point out things that might complement the students' science classes. Seed propagation, for example: some of the sunflowers out front grew where they



Ted McGinn in front of a mural of the school motto, which reads, "My heritage is one of greatness, but I know that I can do more. I must never do less than those who came before. What my mind can conceive and my heart can believe, I can achieve." Photo: Amanda Abrams

TOP TO BOTTOM:
A row of sunflowers against the fence. Photo: Ted McGinn

In warmer weather, zinnias and other flowering plants flourished. Photo: Ted McGinn

This small plot is just outside the school's gates. Photo: Ted McGinn

Bushes of purple flowers highlight one of the school's colorful murals. Photo: Ted McGinn

did because squirrels nibbled on old sunflower heads and moved the kernels from one place to another.

And there are other living things that come and go for the students to study. "We get a fair amount of hummingbirds, goldfinch, cardinals," he said. "The pineapple sage draws hummingbirds and insects, and the brush pile [in back] is a small mammal habitat."

After 45 minutes of wandering around the grounds and examining McGinn's and the students' handiwork, I was impressed. And, needless to say, cold. While McGinn seemed undaunted, I was quite ready to head indoors.

But even on a windy winter day, I could appreciate his resourcefulness and commitment. McGinn is the president of the Eckington Civic Association – whose theme this year is "Greening Eckington" – and seems to feel that the improvements at Emery are symbolic of larger changes afoot. "It's been an evolution," he said, explaining that more than a decade ago, the area was home to two neighborhood crews and serious fights over drugs. "You felt like a prisoner in your own home. But all these things have helped in saving this community." ★

