

Creal Springs Students Make a Difference

Would you be proud of your middle school students if they saw a community need and found a way to solve it? How about if they found the money to repair and improve a board walk over the Cache River wetlands to make it accessible for those who are disabled?

It all started in 2009 when fifth graders at Creal Springs School near Marion IL took a field trip to the Cache River Wetland center. They proceeded to research the wetlands and the trees, animals, birds, and other creatures inhabiting the wetlands.

The Cache River wetlands have been designated a Wetland of International Importance, only the 19th wetland in the United States to receive the distinction. However, until recently, these wetlands were inaccessible to those with mobility limitations.

When the Creal Springs students became finalists for a Disney Planet Challenge Grant, they decided to commit \$15,000 from the grant to the re-construction of a long-damaged boardwalk to make it accessible. The students reached out to Friends of the Cache to match their funds and the boardwalk was dedicated in the spring of 2012.

As the students learned more about the wetlands, they became advocates for the Cache River Wetlands and gave presentations to the school board and to a symposium of middle and high schoolers held at Southern Illinois University. They also wrote letters and spoke to state and federal legislators and to Lt. Governor Sheila Simon about the importance of funding conservation programs.

Although these projects began as a science program, the students were also involved in action civics as they learned about government and making it work at the state and local level. They have been citizen advocates for their local community and brought about a significant improvement in their community. This project is an excellent example of an interdisciplinary approach to civics in which students in a science study learn how to access and reach their public officials. They also learn to research, prepare reports, write persuasively and speak effectively. They learn that active citizens can make a difference in their communities.

Their teacher Fran Wachter, has led the way using her own ideas and resources. She credits the various government agencies who were responsive and gracious to her requests for student involvement.

The Cache River projects have brought great publicity to this school of 175 pre-K-8th graders in far southern Illinois, where 50% of the children are eligible for free or reduced lunches and 89% achieve at or above the state norm on achievement tests.

Learn more at the Cache River webpage which is part of the Creal Springs School webpage at www.marionunit2.org. Learn more about the Disney Planet Challenge grant at disney.go.com/planetchallenge/