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Rockford Christian students get their hands dirty in the name of science

By **Melissa Westphal**

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ROCKFORD — Science class doesn't get more hands-on than when you're outside planting seeds and getting stuck in the mud.

The mud part was a side effect of a field trip today for some of the sixth-grade Rockford Christian students who are part of Julie Rohl's science class.

Three classes — a total of 74 students — planted seeds as part of a rain garden project near a drainage ditch at Bell School and Rote roads. The location sits just north of Rockford Christian school.

The students planted 40 species of grasses and native wildflowers. Rain gardens help with flood control, act as a natural filter for water pollutants, offer a habitat for animals and insects.

This is the third and most ambitious rain garden, a 6.5-acre area, that Severson Dells Nature Center has tackled, said Brian Leaf, Severson's executive development director. The Natural Land Institute was a partner on the project.

Leaf said students were surprised to learn that each half-gallon pail they carried held 5,000 to 10,000 seeds. He spoke to the students on Tuesday, explaining what they'd be doing on Thursday, which got them amped up for the field trip, Rohl said.

The class is studying classifications of living things and biodiversity, so the trip was a perfect pairing for the class work, Rohl said.

Haley Kittle, 12, tried to avoid the mud that her classmates seem to be drawn to on Thursday. She joked with Rohl that she was vying for the "cleanest shoes" award.

"Yeah, I'm amazed by my friend's jumping in the mud," Kittle said. "It's fun to be outside today, especially because we don't have to wear our uniforms."

Terrance Gulley, 11, Hans Reinhardt, 12, and Austin Loven, 12, were three of the muddiest culprits. Their explanation for their dirty appearances was simple: it was a chain reaction, meaning one person got stuck, the other tried to help, then that person got stuck, too.

"I feel like I'm wearing gloves," Reinhardt said, attempting to clean his mud-covered hands. "And our feet feel like they weigh a ton."

The drainage area is in the Red Oak Estates subdivision being developed by Herb McKiski. Leaf complimented McKiski's environmental priorities, saying the project was a "progressive treatment of storm water management."

Leaf said they take every opportunity to get students involved in nature activities. The rain garden is a long-term project, meaning it will be three to five years at least to see results.

"Those students are really getting back to nature today," Leaf said. "What better way to be hands-on than planting seeds, in a few cases, playing in the mud?"

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