

Gurrie students set for spring planting

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Landscaping in the new courtyard at Gurrie Middle School in La Grange is beginning to take shape, thanks to the efforts of the school's Green Team, a club of environmentally conscious students.

Club members wore much more brown than green during a muddy day of construction in early November to build a path of brick pavers and four raised beds surrounded by heavy landscape blocks.

"In the spring, we'll be planting our own salsa garden with peppers, onions, tomatoes and herbs," said eighth-grade English teacher Steve Driscoll, a club co-sponsor. "The whole idea is to be sustainable, to use what we have, prepare our own food and eat healthy."

About 35 Gurrie volunteers joined to haul 19 tons of stone and gravel from a parking lot over a three-day span into the courtyard created by the addition of a second gym during the summer. Materials were purchased by a grant from Siemens Industry Inc., which provided design and engineering work on the gym and other construction projects in La Grange-Countryside Elementary District 105.

Practical know-how for the project came from the club's other sponsor, seventh-grade science teacher Matt Eigel, who owned a landscape company for seven years before joining Gurrie's faculty.

The landscaping project appealed to student volunteers for a number of reasons, allowing them to contribute a variety of talents.

"Using the pick ax was the best part," observed eighth-grader Colin Bailey of La Grange. "I used it yesterday to break up some soil and rocks."

"This is like our biggest project. It's amazing."

As a member of the environmental club last year, Colin remembered doing a lot of planning for the landscaping project and taking some field trips to learn about options. They visited Northwestern and Stevenson High School to see their green roof and solar panels.

"This year, it seems to be happening almost instantly,"

he said. "Now that we're doing it, it's turning out great." Classmate Bradley Udzieła from La Grange said he enjoyed getting dirty and doing some heavy lifting of landscape materials.

"It's fun," Bradley said. "We're helping the planet."

Eighth-grader Michael Cummings of La Grange brought technical expertise to help record the project's progress. He set up a camera aimed out from a second-story classroom to take photos every 3 seconds over five hours.

"I thought it would be cool to put it on a video on YouTube," Michael said. "I watched yesterday's progress, and three hours is condensed to a minute and a half."

Siemens matched the Gurrie students with a team of Northwestern University volunteers, who offered advice on sustainable projects via teleconferences.

"This was a bright group, very good to work with," said Joshua Kaplan, a senior in chemical engineering, one of four Northwestern volunteers who rolled up their sleeves with the Gurrie students.

Lyons Township High School sophomore Natalie Ruffner from La Grange also returned to her alma mater to lug landscape blocks around, pack down pea gravel for the walkways and shovel dirt.

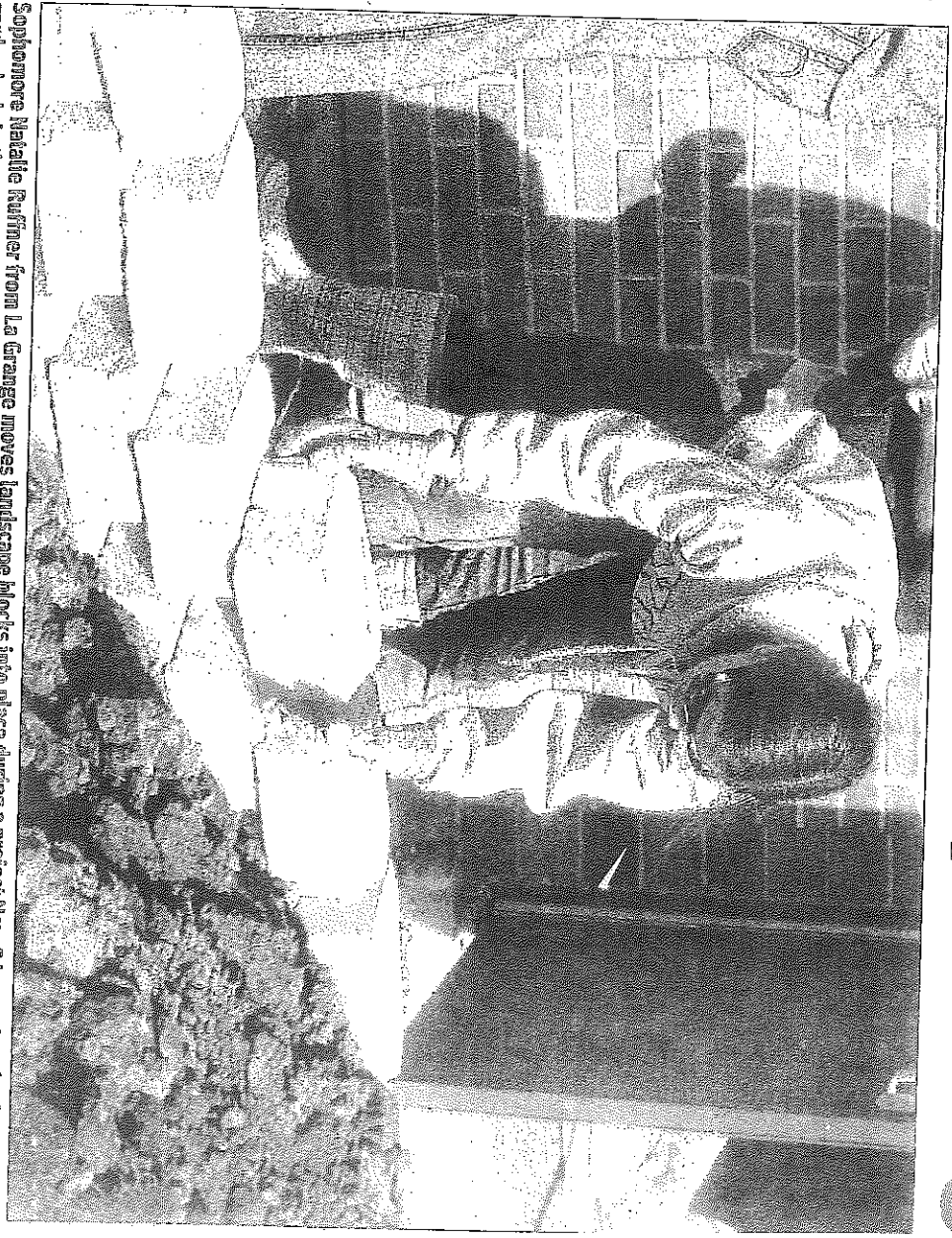
There was a big smile on Ruffner's face as she looked around with satisfaction at the project taking shape around her. It was a vision she and her classmates conceived as eighth-graders.

At Driscoll's urging, the group drafted a business plan for a sustainable courtyard garden and presented it to the School Board.

"It was exciting but nerve-racking presenting our speeches to the board," Ruffner said. The group was pleased to receive approval and the Siemens grant.

"It's really cool to actually see it happen," she said. "It's fun to see all the kids being involved even though they weren't here when we started," she said.

In addition to building the four raised beds, plans call for planting a pear tree and establishing a worm com-



Sophomore Natalie Ruffner from La Grange moves landscape blocks into place during a project Nov. 5 to create raised vegetable garden beds in the new courtyard at Gurrie Middle School in La Grange. Ruffner's eighth-grade English class proposed the project.



Gurrie Middle School seventh-graders Julia Voci, Jeremiah Hill and Mihajlo Andrich, all from La Grange, load their shovels with dirt to fill a raised vegetable garden bed during a project Nov. 5 at the La Grange school's new courtyard. JANE MICHAELS-SUN



Matt Eigel, a seventh-grade science teacher at Gurrie Middle School in La Grange, holds a roll of landscape fabric during a courtyard landscaping project Nov. 5 at the school. JANE MICHAELS-SUN-TIMES MEDIA

posting bin in March, before seventh-graders plant vegetables in the beds.

"One student told me, 'I just can't wait to walk outside to the pear tree, grab a pear and eat it,'" Driscoll said.

Students also have expressed interest in cooking

demonstrations to use their future produce and in selling or exhibiting the fruits of their labors at area farmers markets.

"We want to create a young generation of humans who are responsible and want to take care of the planet," he said.