

GRADE SCHOOLERS ARE STUMPED NO MORE

New community program advocates safety for school grounds

By Joseph Aquino

Big-boy toys were unleashed and dead trees vanished. The sound of chainsaws excited community volunteers, while dead branches came crashing down on grassy school areas. Tree-care experts traversed the malnourished branches like circus tight rope performers, wielding axes instead of umbrellas. It was the up-and-coming One Day One School volunteer program that was giving Salem Drive Elementary School an environmental facelift. Started three years ago by Tom “Ace” Gallagher, the flourishing charity program attracted more than 50 community volunteers and 50 tree-care experts from different organizations on Saturday, Nov. 1.

According to Nemours Foundation, a foundation geared to improve the health and lifestyle for children, each year, more than 200,000 children are rushed to the ER for playground-related injuries. Poor surfaces are a main contributor to these types of injuries. To reduce the amount of outside incidents, school grounds need to be cared for on a consistent basis. Also, according to the National Program for Playground Safety, 70 percent of all playground injuries occur because of poor surface areas.

Gallagher, owner of Ace Gallagher Stump Grinding Service, was walking with his son on the Salem Drive Elementary School path when he noticed dead tree limbs hanging.

“If a dead tree limb falls at the wrong time, it can seriously injure a child,” Gallagher said. Considering that children are extremely active on school grounds, it was a great place for the program to donate their time. Schools are supposed to be an environment where kids can be comfortable and safe. Hanover Township did not have enough room in their budget to afford an environmental clean-up on their grounds. Fortunately, Gallagher and many other tree services volunteered their time, when they could be getting paid, to help remove hazardous trees and plant fresh trees and shrubs.

Local community efforts

Joseph Aquino, YMCA volunteer coordinator of One Day One School, donated his time in attending meetings to help organize the program; and he spent a full Saturday planting trees and shrubs, mulching, and running activities for the children.

Joseph Longo, volunteer from the YMCA, assisted Aquino in running activities and improving the school grounds. “I was very happy with the amount of volunteers that showed up. The community came together and donated their time for a great cause” Longo said. Before the young volunteers could get involved, while the tree-experts were removing harmful branches and trees, Aquino, and three other YMCA volunteers, ran activities for the children.

“Thanks to the YMCA, we were able to keep the kids active, safe, and involved in the program. Their volunteer team kept the children away from the machines and areas that can be potentially dangerous,” said Gallagher. After the big boy toys and tree climbers finished in the front of the school, the volunteers, children and adults, walked through the woods and picked up bottles, trash, and anything that was not biodegradable.

Blaine Rothhauser, Florham Park environmental commissioner, donated his time to play an important and active role in One Day One School. “Dead trees and branches are indeed a hazard in public places and should always be maintained for the safety of children, faculty, and workers,” said Rothhauser. Rothhauser and the Hanover Township Arborist, Lorraine Konapka, ran educational centers for the children and made sure that nothing environmentally friendly was removed by the tree companies. “To showcase local biodiversity, an educational table was set up during the event. Native animal skulls, deadwood with associated organisms, native and invasive leaves, bird nests, and wildflowers were all on display. EC members talked to local school children and parents about the process of replanting, deadwood ecology, and biodiversity,” said Rothhauser.

In June of 2007, at Ridgedale Middle School in Florham Park, the first full-scale event took place. With hopes to spread the idea, Gallagher consulted with two of his friends, Florham Park Mayor Scott Eveland and Rick Close of the Davey Tree Expert Company in Morris Plains, and, quickly, earned their support. With dedication and eagerness to improve the safety for children on school grounds, amazingly, they rounded up approximately 75 volunteers – including additional tree services, school officials, town representatives, public works employees, community organizations, local townspeople, high school students, and many children.

Future Plans

Recently, Gallagher was informed that *Tree Care Industry Magazine* offered to partner up with the One Day One school program. On Dec. 8, One Day One School will run nationwide. Tree Care Industry Magazine is affiliated with more than 2,000 tree care firms and companies. When One Day One School runs nationwide, an environmental uproar will be attacking schools around the nation – promoting safety for children on school grounds. Incredibly, just in three and a half days, in two towns, One Day One School has saved the tax payers more than 160, 000 dollars.

Gallagher recited a quote by California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, “You can’t be seen unless you visualize.” Imagine, two years from now, if this program runs two days a year in each state. With an estimated cost of 80,000 per school, it will save the tax payers of the United States eight million dollars. That’s an economic relief! What would the economic advantage be if the event ran 10 times a year in each state? Now, that’s visualization, and, certainly, realistic!

In such a short period of time, this event has boomed into a national gift – thanks to the founders and everyone involved in the program.

“The group of guys I’m involved with are solid,” said Gallagher.