

Ellen's Place Outdoor Classroom

Poughkeepsie, NY

Discovery, Learning and Healing
for Poughkeepsie's Children and
Families

What if a school in a challenged area of Louisville, Kentucky built an outdoor space that transformed its students and teachers?

What if a school in a challenged neighborhood in Los Angeles built an outdoor space, transformational for their students and teachers, that inspired other schools to create like spaces, together inspiring the Los Angeles Unified School District to adopt the model throughout the city?

What if, in the age of COVID, Poughkeepsie could have such an outdoor space? One that could provide discovery, healing, and learning for its children and families?

WHAT IF...

TRANSFORMATIONS

“Being in the middle of housing projects, we’re surrounded by concrete and power lines. Not a lot of grass. Not a park-like setting at all... Our children come from a very violent neighborhood. We are in one of the highest crime neighborhoods in Louisville, [Kentucky]. There’s a lot of killing out here. And drugs. And violence. So our kids see a lot.

Because of where we are and the kids that we serve, it was very hectic, very stressful for my staff. Our kids were really hyper. They were quick to hit one another... It was constantly, ‘No, don’t do this. Sit down. Your twenty minutes is up in that area.’

We always knew they were smart, but that was always the struggle that our kids had.

If you can’t sit down for a few minutes without hitting your friend- that’s a problem.

Then they don’t like school. Then they don’t want to go there. Then they become a statistic. And it’s the first grade teacher telling the second grade teacher, ‘Watch out for that one.’ Then they end up dropping out of school. And it’s a vicious cycle.

It has to start here. It has to start as young as we do it here.”

Sharon Hemingway, Director, Keystone Learning Academy, Louisville, Kentucky



“For twenty-seven years, I’ve been a Director... I worked in another low-income neighborhood, and now we’re next to a housing project. Never before have I seen our kids relate this way to one another. Never in the twenty-seven years. Until we got the [Outdoor Classroom], and became inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach, I’ve never seen anything like it.

It was all our fault. We look back on it now and say, ‘Why did it take us this long to figure it out?’ We could have been doing this for all these years, and we just hate to think of all the kids that we’ve missed; that we’ve had all these years that didn’t get to have this experience.”

Sharon Hemingway



“I have to forget about them. I’m relearning everything, because this is totally different.”

Sylvia Diaz, Early Education Assistant, Fourth Street Early Childhood Center, East Los Angeles, California; when asked what skills she brought to the Outdoor Classroom from her previous twenty-two years of experience in the Los Angeles Unified School District. She then spoke about tending the Outdoor Classroom with the children. She used words like “assisting” and “guiding” when talking about her relationship with the children. The word “teaching” wasn’t spoken.



“If a child falls and there is somebody next to them they’ll go and try to help them—and without teacher guidance... In traditional playgrounds, that’s a skill we try to develop with the children. Here, it’s become like second nature.

One of the things we were reflecting on this week is that we don’t see conflicts outside... This is the second year that we’ve been open, and I remember only one or two incidents, in two years.”

Josefina Navarro, Principal of the Fourth Street Early Childhood Center in East Los Angeles, California



“We just had to be in control. Once we figured out we didn’t have to be- that’s when all the chaos stopped...”

There are teachers who are in better health, whose blood pressure has gone down. It is unbelievable what it has done to all of us.”

Sharon Hemmingway



Our kids are scoring off the charts [academically]- especially in the social emotional categories.

Our toddlers talk so well now because they have to communicate with one another so that they know what the other is doing... The language has just exploded...

Sharon Hemmingway







































THE OUTDOOR CLASSROOM

The Ellen's Place Outdoor Classroom will be designed to provide opportunities for healing and educational transformations in the children and families it serves. The custom landscape design will include activity stations (such as Art, Building, Music and Movement, Close Observation Table) filled with natural materials large and small (such as logs, branches, rocks and stones, pinecones, plants, seashells, blocks, etc.). Natural features will include a hill, plantings, a boulder, and more.

Ellen's Place will be designed by The Nature Explore project, of Lincoln, Nebraska. Based on continuing research into children's outdoor learning, Nature Explore designs and certifies outdoor classrooms that are customised to each location. It has designed and/or certified over 1,000 outdoor classrooms worldwide. Their designs have been adopted by the Los Angeles Unified School district for development throughout the city's Early Learning Center system. The Mary Kay Foundation has funded over twenty certified outdoor classrooms at domestic violence centers nationwide. Nature Explore designs are found at schools, state and local parks, botanical gardens, military bases, child care centers, and even a hospital. The designers incorporate ideas from a variety of stakeholders in each project.

Potential uses for Ellen's Place, in addition to serving the general public, include:

Court mandated visitations between children in temporary fostercare, and their parents.

Classes held by schools in the Poughkeepsie City School District.

Training teens to mentor group projects involving younger students.

Mary Kay Funded Classroom | Denver, CO



Facts

Size : 6,408 square feet

Designed: April 2011

Established: July 2011

Location: Denver, CO



Botanical Gardens & Arboretums

Bailey Arboretum | Locust Valley, NY



Elementary Schools

Gomez Heritage Elementary School | Omaha, NE



THE STORY OF ELLEN'S PLACE

Ellen's Place is a memorial to Ellen Lynn Hall, founder and first Director of Boulder Journey School (BJS), in Boulder, Colorado. BJS is internationally respected for its innovative and constantly evolving pedagogy; its Graduate Program in Early Childhood Education; and its yearly Summer Conference, which draws educators from across the country and internationally. Ellen co-authored the book, "Seen and Heard: Children's Rights in Early Childhood Education," the defining work on the subject. Her profound advocacy for the rights of all children as current citizens of the world, and for their right to participate in their education and community, received worldwide recognition and respect.

LINKS / INSPIRATIONS

Boulder Journey School's Philosophy: <https://educators.boulderjourneyschool.com/philosophy.html>

The Hundred Languages of Children: <https://www.reggiochildren.it/en/reggio-emilia-approach/100-linguaggi-en/>

Hawkins Centers of Learning: <http://www.hawkinscenters.org/>

The Reggio Emilia Approach: <https://www.reggiochildren.it/en/reggio-emilia-approach/>

Nature Explore Design Services: <https://natureexplore.org/outdoor-classroom-design/>

Fear Less: Hope For Our Children- short film from BJS: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=94LHCSYGCHk>

Ordinary Moments- short film from BJS: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FK2qD_nWoNE

The Voices of Children: Documentary film of children's voices, thoughts, opinions worldwide- 24 minutes.

<https://worldforumfoundation.org/workinggroups/childrens-rights/voc-documentary/>

NATURE EXPLORE BLOG POSTS:

Nature Transforming Teachers and Children: <https://natureexplore.org/nature-transforming-teachers-and-children/>

A Life-Saving Transformation: Mark's Story: <https://natureexplore.org/a-life-saving-transformation-marks-story/>

The Power of Trust: <https://natureexplore.org/the-power-of-trust/>

CREDITS



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