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COMMUNITY NEWS

Students help with hurricane protection

Plants tended until replanting on coast

By Barri Bronston
East Jefferson bureau

When fourth- and fifth-graders at Metairie Academy for Advanced Studies were looking for ways they could improve hurricane protection, one of their teachers pointed them to a program called Coastal Roots.

Based at Louisiana State University's College of Education, the student-driven program aims to restore Louisiana's disintegrating coast and provide frontline protection during hurricanes. Students manage and maintain a nursery, raising an assortment of native plants until they can be replanted along the coast.

"We want to stand up for the coast," fifth-grader Max Pancamo said. "We feel this project will help the community a lot." Classmate Ysabella Ramirez agreed.

"A lot of our land has been taken away by natural causes, and this is a way to stop the erosion," she said.

Coastal Roots began in 2001 as a way to incorporate school children into one of the state's most pressing environmental issues — coastal erosion. Initially, six schools signed up to participate. Today, there are 20 schools, including Metairie Academy, St. Martin's Episcopal School in Metairie and four public schools in St. Charles Parish.

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Metairie Academy students help City Park

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"This program allows the students to feel a sense of control over the issue of hurricane protection, which is so important after all the children experienced during Katrina," said fifth-grade teacher Mona Herbert, who is overseeing the project at Metairie Academy.

"It also allows them to make a positive contribution to their community and to actively put into practice what they are learning in science and social studies."

Metairie Academy kicked off the project Dec. 11 with a visit from Coastal Roots coordinator Pam Blanchard, who operates the program with representatives of the LSU School of Plant, Environmental and Soil Sciences, the LSU AgCenter and the Louisiana Sea Grant College Program.

Blanchard met with teachers and class representatives to discuss the program in greater detail and designate an appropriate spot for a "can yard," a nursery production area where plants are raised until they are large enough to be moved to the coast.

When students return from winter break, they will begin planting more than 1,000 seeds of native coastline plants. Students will nurture the plants through the winter, after which they will be moved and replanted at a designated spot along the Louisiana coast.

Students will receive adult help when they need it, otherwise they are solely responsible for the project, Blanchard said.

"I'm not going to have a shovel in my hand," she said. "They're the ones that are going to do the hard work. It's their project. We just help them along the way. We'll also send a person out once a month to make sure things are going well."

Meanwhile, Metairie Academy's first-graders are getting into the act by growing irises and other native plants that will eventually be replanted along the lagoons in City Park. Herbert said there is no such thing as being too young to learn about wetlands loss and the importance of habitat restoration.

"The students are learning how to take care of something that will make a difference in the environment," Blanchard said. "We believe that this pro-

ject is a wonderful launching point for lessons to teach students about why we're losing our wetlands and why environmental stewardship is so impor-

tant."

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