

The Advertiser

# Students mark memorial

## Lafayette Middle classes plant trees to help island

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Memorials were held Wednesday to remember the dead from last year's Deepwater Horizon explosion and subsequent ecological disaster. Politicians both local and national paid their respects, many of them on Grand Isle.

Across the island, a group of Lafayette Middle School students and their teachers did what they have done every spring for the last six years.

They helped make a difference, planting black mangrove seedlings along the shore of the Grand Isle State Park lagoon, giving the hurricane- and petrochemical-assaulted wetland environment a fighting chance at recovery.

"Before we got out here, I really did not know what to

expect," said E-Science Academy teacher Donald Kent. "I hadn't been out here since last spring, so we didn't know if they had been affected or not. It was on the lagoon, so I was pretty sure they had not been oiled."

Usually the seventh-grade students from the academy make two trips a year to the barrier island. In the fall, they make a scouting trip, becoming familiar with the island, its various ecologies and gathering mangrove cuttings to grow into the spring's seedlings to be planted.

But last fall, the park area was still off limits. The public areas had been used as staging sites for the cleanup crews who fanned out across the island, picking up any accumulated tar and oil along the coast.



Lafayette Middle School E-Science Academy student Jamal Cropper shows off one of the black mangrove seedlings planted in the park.

Now, it's apparent that those crews are gone. After the students planted their consignment of donated seedlings, they moved to the seashore, where clumps of tar mingled with the usual driftwood, sargassum and trash.

"I found some tar balls out here, just walking," said student William Guilbeau. "I

have a bunch of them, right here on the beach."

The date for this spring's trip was not intentionally set to mark the Deepwater Horizon anniversary. According to E-Science Academy Director Stacey Hess, it was more a matter of finding a date that

See Students, Page A8

worked inside the program's busy curriculum.

"It wasn't something we noticed until a week or two ago," she said.

"It was something we set, basically taking the planners out and finding an open date."

Once the anniversary was noticed, however, the staff took the opportunity to make it a teaching moment.

Kent revisited his classes from last spring, showing the students how the beach, marsh, lagoon and ridges of the island all interact, with anything (like millions of barrels of oil) affecting one part of the island having sympathetic effects on the other areas.

The long term issue, at least in Kent's eyes, is the constant erosion of the shoreline across Louisiana, not just on the barrier islands.

"We've planted between 3,000 and 4,000 trees," Kent said. "We plant bald cypress and red swamp maple on Avery Island. The black mangrove we plant on Grand Isle."

The students learn as they plant. Groups move through the marsh, carrying flats of seedlings and planting tools.

Kent and Hess riddle them, asking questions aloud about the environment as the students walk through their open-air textbook.

"What kind of snails are those?" Kent asks as students roll little periwinkle snails in their palms. Several students answer correctly.

"I ask them about the periwinkle snails in the marsh, then we get to the beach and I ask them about all the moon snails," he explains later. "Hopefully it is sinking in that each of these environments, even though they are right next to each other, are different."

The other thing that is sinking in is that it takes a while for the ecology to recover from man-made disasters.

"It was a devastating event, that's no doubt," said Scooter Dronet of Grand Isle Shipyards, one of the trip's sponsors. "It turned out not to be a devastating as we thought it was going to be, but people are still working to get back to normal."

The island does look different from what it did last summer. Gone are the constant reminders of the oil spill. Most of the signs calling for the destruction of BP for its part in the disaster have been removed, replaced by signs for rentals and air conditioning contractors. The graveyard which had marked one seaside home had been dismantled, the myriad crosses bundled into a pyre with one large cross labeled "GREED" at the top.

At the state park, the staging area is gone, revealing the old parking lot underneath where tents and portable buildings sat last August.

But Hess also noted that

oil is not the only threat to the environmental balance.

"After Katrina, we used to take the students on the boats out to Fifi Island," she said.

"They were going out there before there was an actual E Science program. It was a lot easier to see the progress on Fifi because it is uninhabited. Out here it is harder to see the difference we make, but in the

future we want to tag and take measurements so we know how much the mangroves have grown."

For some students, though, they just want to know that things will be set right.

"If I saw someone from BP out here today, I'd ask them how long they think it is going to take to clean up all the oil," said student Christian Duhon. "I think it's going to take years."

Thursday, April 21, 2011