

BIG TOWN GOING GREEN

An outdoor classroom



GELL (Green-roof Environmental Literacy Laboratory) helps children connect with nature through projects such as the rooftop garden at P.S. 41 in Greenwich Village. (Right) Science Teacher Vicki Sando reads to first-graders.

BY HOLLY REICH
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When a school outgrows its physical space, a roof may be just the right place to use for a classroom. That's what Vick Sando, a mother at P.S. 41 in Greenwich Village, realized in 2003, when her son was attending kindergarten at the elementary school.

"The kids were studying plants. The only problem is that they weren't gardening or doing any hands-on activities outside," she explains. "I approached our former principal about putting containers in the lower yard. The PTA gave me some money, and we kept expanding. Then we started thinking about using the roof. In New York City, we are just starved for space, and the roof wasn't being used at all."

In 2006, Sando founded GELL (Green-roof Environmental Literacy Laboratory) with the primary goal of having children reconnect with nature. The 15,000 sq. ft. living classroom is the largest of its kind at a New York City public school.

At the ribbon cutting last fall,

Manhattan Borough president Scott Stringer said, "This project expands our commitment to making environmental study a fixture in classrooms."

In fact, once her kids graduated from P.S. 41, the school created the position of environmental science program developer for Sando.

"It's a testament to our principal, Kelly Shannon. She recognized how important environmental science is for our young students' future," she says. "When thinking about using the roof, obviously the overcrowding in our building came into play. We have been over capacity for the last six years. When you are in this situation, naturally you look for other spaces."

Shannon explains, "This is a building designed to hold 615 students, and we currently have around 800 students. There is not enough outdoor space in the immediate vicinity that is not pure concrete. That has really spurred us on."

GELL took six years to come to fruition. A group of volunteers patched together funding for the project. Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer and New York City Council Speaker Christine Quinn allocated city capital. P.S. 41's PTA,

the National Gardening Association, local businesses as well as corporate and private donations were also instrumental in helping GELL get off the ground.

GELL's team of teachers, volunteers and green roof professionals worked together to create the space. The rooftop houses an extensive variety of succulent, low-maintenance plants, an herb garden and other native vegetation.

Half of the roof is utilized as classroom. The other half operates as open space for the children to enjoy the outdoors and for activities including school functions.

"The primary goal has always been to get children outside of the classroom and to reconnect to nature. We leave it up to the teachers on how to tie in their current studies," Shannon says.

The school also developed a teacher's curriculum guide using math, literacy and science coaches to help integrate the roof into each grade's education.

The green roof also provides important benefits for the community. "It reduces storm water runoff, moderates the heat that builds up in our area, decreases the school's carbon footprint and helps

improve local air quality. It also shades and insulates the roof and lowers the interior sound level as well," Shannon explains.

Sando adds, "The green roof showcases the technology that our children are going to have to learn. Hands-on learning teaches them about critical issues that they are going to face in the future."

"We are dealing with elementary school-age children who are using their minds, bodies and hands. We are bringing education alive in another way. It is a deeper approach to learning," adds the principal.

GELL is also expanding into the community. It has formed a partnership with a soup kitchen and is working with local restaurants to sell their herbs.

"As our kids move up through school, we can do something that can help the world get better. One foot in front of the other is part of the process," Shannon says.

For more information visit ps41.org.

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