

# A NATURAL CONNECTION

Nonprofit Urban Roots brings environmental education to elementary school

By Olivia Stevens

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“Whoa-hhhh,” came a murmur from a group of 64 Cornerstone Montessori Elementary School students when they learned that the humble oak tree can live for more than 200 years.

As Urban Roots’ conservation program director, David Woods, read from “As an Oak Tree Grows,” the students, from first- to third-grade classes, only broke attention to ask why the landscape around the tree changed so much over time or boo when the tree died and had to be cut down.

“A big part of it is just encouraging questions and really helping the youth recognize that oh, yeah, they might already know a lot,” said Woods. “When they do ask kind of the bigger questions that require maybe a bit more science, providing that to them, but really helping them see that they already have a lot of that knowledge within themselves if they just kind of work through it.”

Urban Roots, a nonprofit that provides internships based on environmental education to youth on the East Side of St. Paul, has made twice-monthly trips to the school, once for younger students and once for older students, starting in January and ending March 30.

Their role has been to teach students through age-appropriate activities regarding the importance of the natural world outside them, engaging them with local birds, pollinators and trees’ survival during the winter months.

## Tree yoga and milkweed planting

The March 16 session, for the younger elementary students, provided student stations to cycle through and get a sense “of what it might look like to be a plant,” Woods said.

Woods led a type of tree improv, **URBAN ROOTS » PAGE 6**



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Second-grader Arlo Lamb explains how he planted milkweed seeds in his planter at Cornerstone Montessori Elementary School in St. Paul this month. The East Side nonprofit Urban Roots has been providing environmental education to students at Cornerstone in twice-monthly visits.



# Urban Roots

FROM PAGE 1

leading students through yoga poses that allowed them to stretch their bodies while imitating the growth from seed to sprawling oak. After making it to the end of their lives as trees, some decided to become squirrels, chirping and clawing at remaining trees.

At another station, students traced their hands on a piece of paper, coloring and decorating them to look like their own little trees.

Students also began the process of growing milkweed, pushing seeds into plastic cartons filled with dirt, whose sprouts they will replant this spring when weather permits. They understand the importance of this plant as the only food source for monarch caterpillars, and though they also planted milkweed last year, with Urban Roots' help, third-graders Marci Rogers and Eliza Harmon think they'll have a more successful crop this season.

Marci said Urban Roots taught her "more about the chemicals that hurt butterflies."

"I kind of figured out why we had no caterpillars on our milkweed last year," she said. "Our grass had this weird exterminator that got all over the dandelions, and that was horrible."

Eliza also hypothesized that because they painted the containers in which they originally planted the milkweed last year, the paint could have "seeped into" holes in the container and harmed the plant.

"If it's like a concrete container thing, yes, you may paint it, but if it's just like cardboard or thin, you really shouldn't paint it if you have a real plant in it," Eliza said.

## Building 'stewardship and pride for the spaces we live in'

This type of engagement is what Urban Roots encourages, according to Cornerstone Montessori Elementary Program Manager Lindsay Ruble.



PHOTOS BY JOHN AUTEY - PIONEER PRESS

Sam Mochert, right, of Urban Roots gives potting instructions to students in the greenhouse at Cornerstone Montessori Elementary School in St. Paul this month. Urban Roots has been providing environmental education to students at Cornerstone in twice-monthly visits, working with about 60 children to learn about birds, pollinators and plants during the wintertime through stories and hands-on activities.

**"Students generally want to continue to study about different plants, especially Midwestern plants. It's really exciting to see them be able to identify different things that are local, and I think it instills kind of an important citizenship mentality for them."**

— Lindsay Ruble, Cornerstone Elementary program manager

"Oftentimes they will be so engaged with this work that the students will come back into the classrooms and want to extend the work in different ways," Ruble said. "Students generally want to continue to study about different plants, especially Midwestern plants. It's really exciting to see them be able to identify different things that are local, and I think it instills kind of an important citizenship mentality for them."

The school connected with the nonprofit through a city-wide school programming

network, as Urban Roots has done work in schools before, though usually with older students.

"Especially in Minnesota, we want our kids to be able to have enrichment activities outdoors, and Urban Roots is also based on the East Side, they're a local organization and they match really closely with our values," said Ruble.

Also a priority is engaging in nature in a way that is accessible to students with diverse experiences and resources and develops pride in the area where they live,

Ruble said.

Hayley Ball, executive director of Urban Roots, said providing education about how to interact with nature locally is core to the organization's mission.

"Sometimes the connection for smaller children in a park could be like playgrounds and swings, but really, also it's some of the incredible larger green spaces and, like, connection in nature," said Ball. "Creating those little nuggets of information for youth where they're able to kind of understand nature is accessible where we live in an urban environment."

Ball continued: "I think there's a lot of really cool things that happen when you are able to connect with nature at a young age. I think it's feeling like a connection to community and a sense of stewardship and pride for the spaces we live in and understanding kind of what part we play as individuals working to help better our community."

## 'All of this is nature'

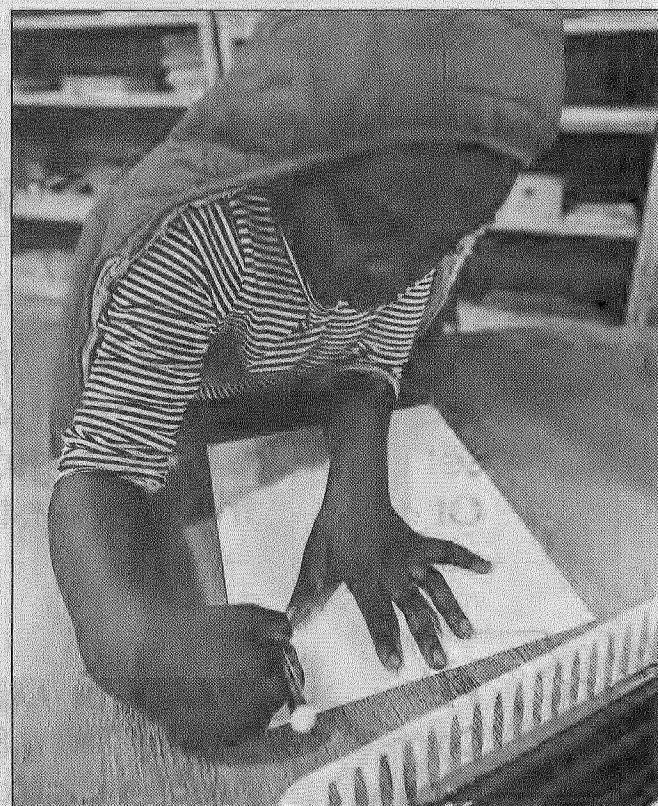
Ruble hopes to discuss continuing a similar partnership with Urban Roots next year as it's been a "wonderful experience" for students, but said she understands the nonprofit is often busy with many other ventures, so nothing is set yet.

Marci and Eliza said they feel excited to come to school when they know Urban Roots will be there, and their favorite project this year was painting birdhouses in groups and putting them up outside the school to monitor.

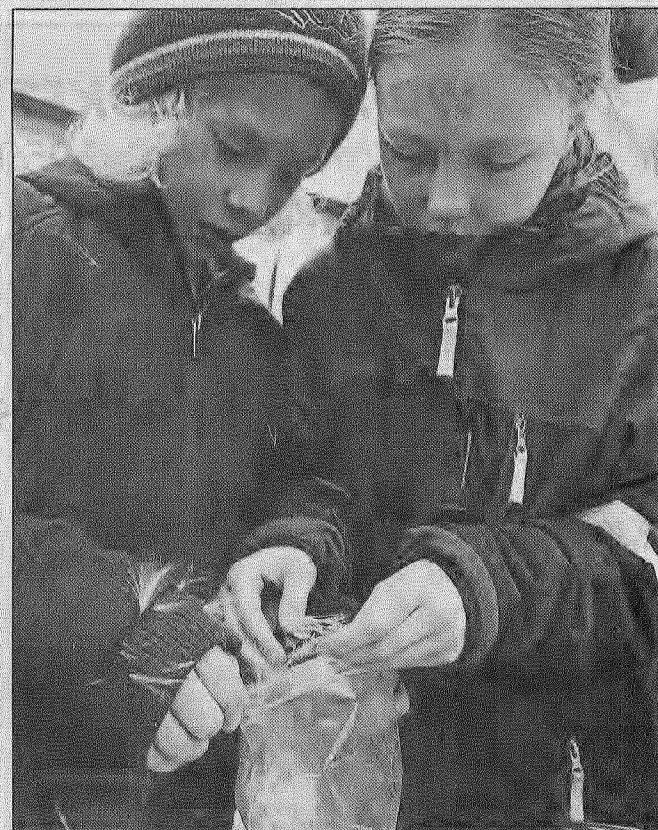
Reflecting on the organization's visits, the students said they appreciate gaining practical experience about important processes they can see playing out every day.

"All of this is nature," Eliza said, gesturing around the room. "Everything else we do is just like making monster puppets and stuff."

Marci added: "I think every child should get to learn about all the plants and animals, but not everyone gets to."



First-grader Wangari Njoroge traces the outline of her hand on a sheet of paper. Students colored and decorated their tracings to look like little trees.



Third-graders Marci Rogers and Eliza Harmon harvest milkweed seeds from a milkweed pod at Cornerstone Montessori this month.



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