

EcoFest

Laurel School’s ‘Environmental Justice’ semester brings focus to green initiatives

By **SUE REID**

Fittingly presented at Laurel School’s 150-acre Butler campus in Russell Township, complete with woodland, waterways and three miles of hiking trails, the first-ever EcoFest Saturday drew more than 400 for the free environmentally conscious event.

The afternoon featured interactive family activities, a variety of green exhibitors in the field of environmental justice as well as guided hikes, entertainment, food and more.

Created to bring students to the stage to practice their advocacy, EcoFest also served to raise awareness of change-making organizations throughout Northeast Ohio, including the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, Loiter East Cleveland, United Way of Greater Cleveland, the Western Reserve Land Conservancy, Shaker Youth Leeds, Black Environmental Leaders and many more – all of which had a focus on sustainability.

“Eco Fest is about bringing folks together who care about people and the planet,” Angela Yeager, director of Laurel’s Environmental Justice Semester, said, with the day’s theme being sustainability, community, action and justice.

Those are the same themes of Laurel’s new Environmental Justice Semester, which will launch next fall and is being forged as a transformational educational experience for 10th and 11th grade girls who learn through rigorous interdisciplinary work focused around studying local problems and devising solutions, Ms. Yeager explained.

The semester is open to incoming 10th and 11th grade girls from any school, public, private or faith-based, not just Laurel, and will involve project focused coursework which will support partner organizations like the Western Reserve Land Conservancy, the Cleveland Museum of Natural History and the Black Environmental Leaders through volunteer hours and project work, built into the school day.

Students will work on individual projects in such areas as climate change policy research, environmental education, ecological restoration, tackling food deserts, journalism and more.

The semester is the brainchild of Laurel head of school Ann V. Klotz, who said she recognizes that students are most concerned about our people, our planet and climate change. They want to make a positive impact now, not wait until they are adults, she said.

“Laurel has long had a commitment to environmental sustainability,” Ms. Klotz said, “and we want to make that manifest by sponsoring this first EcoFest in Northeast Ohio” and launching the Environmental Justice program.

“We have only one world, and it’s this one, and our young people are calling for action and hope.”

A highlight of EcoFest was a virtual preservation by Audubon Medal-Winning Author Richard Louv, whose talk for the crowd gathered in Conway Pavilion was “Planet Hope: Staying hopeful while taking action for the planet.”



Photos by Geoff Powers

Sisters Hazel and Claire Cox, both students at Laurel School and residents of Waite Hill, prepare a plant-based dish in the mud kitchen, one of the plethora of “green” activities and events presented as part of the first EcoFest held last Saturday at the school’s Butler Campus in Russell Township. The event featured a variety of change-making organizations throughout Northeast Ohio, all of which had a focus on sustainability.

Mr. Louv spoke of the importance of our relationship with nature as well as of ecological challenges, among other discussion points.

Outside the pavilion was a white board that posed the sentence “I will take action for the planet by...” with people writing responses like “Recycle,” “Eating vegan” and “Planting Native Plants,” among others. Other boards spread throughout the event posed such questions for public input as “What sustainable change do you want to see in your community/school?”

“Our goal is to equip girls to be change makers with regards to the natural world,” Ms. Klotz said, “and also to give them a tool kit that will allow them to make change in whatever communities they occupy going forward.”

The Butler campus, which Laurel School acquired in 1999 and will house the Environmental Justice Program in its Fairmount House there, is the “ideal centerpiece” for such a program, Ms. Klotz continued.

“Laurel has long imagined Butler as a place to inspire a love for the outdoors and create change makers who want to go into the world to make a difference,” said Ms. Klotz. “Launching EcoFest on our Butler Campus connects our students with local community organizations committed to bringing about real change. We hope this will be the first of many future events and opportunities Laurel will offer aligned around sustainability, equity and environmental stewardship.”

“We have been very careful about where we place structures in the topography,” Ms. Klotz added of Butler’s layout. “We want to put our money where our mouth is and walk the walk with sustainability and protect our wetlands.”

“We are living the values and mission of environmental justice in the way we structure and live the program (at Butler),” Ms. Klotz said.

“Butler is a great model for looking to our natural spaces for solutions,” Ms. Yeager continued. “Nature has the power to calm, to focus and inspire students.”

“Like our EcoFest speaker Richard Louv has identified, many people suffer from nature deficit disorder, and any time we can bring folks outside, we are making a positive



impact on our only home planet.

“The Butler campus is pure magic,” she said.

The campus on Fairmount Road has been used for field trips, athletics and outdoor learning and summer camps for over 15 years. In recent years it has been utilized as a campus for Laurel grades 3-5.

In addition to woodland and waterways and three miles of hiking trails, which many toured during EcoFest, Butler is home to world-class athletic facilities, including the 16,000-square-foot Alice Lehmann Butler ’49 Center for Fitness and Wellness.

The campus also includes two all-season lodges, a 3,000-square-foot pavilion, a 1,600-square foot Magic Tree House and five yurts.

Part of the Environmental Justice Program will include outdoor research and forest restoration on the Butler Campus, Ms. Klotz noted.

“This Environmental Justice program will bring diverse groups of students together to explore how best to care for the land and care for the common good,” she said.

The semester is made possible by a \$250,000 matching grant Laurel received from the Edward E. Ford Foundation.

EcoFest was proposed as part of the school’s grant proposal, Ms. Yeager added.

“Part of this was thinking of how to bring students to the stage and microphone to voice how they feel about our climate and the environment,” she said.

“We have been an educational innovator since 1896,” Ms. Klotz added. “This

Environmental Justice semester is our answer to a transformative, interdisciplinary educational experience unlike any other offered in Cleveland today.”

Ms. Klotz said it is her hope that events like EcoFest and the upcoming Environmental Justice Semester will make a greater difference in the world.

“We will drop a tiny pebble in a pond and hope the ripples it sends out will become a model for other institutions,” Ms. Klotz, who has served as head of school since 2004, said.

In development over the past couple of years, this semester, which is open for applications of interest currently, is about what Laurel can do to be of use to students across Northeast Ohio, many of whom do not have the opportunity for private education, Ms. Klotz said.

“Real learning is mutual and collaborative,” Ms. Klotz noted. “I’m interested in the public purpose of a private school.”

“There’s no other program like this around the country,” she added. “Innovation is our tradition since 1896, and this is the next plank in that.”

A nationally recognized school for girls in kindergarten through Grade 12 with a coeducational Pre-Primary School, Laurel School, at 1 Lyman Circle in Shaker Heights, defines its mission as inspiring each girl to fulfill her promise and to better the world.

“The planet is calling for more people to advocate for it,” Ms. Yeager said. “Now is the time.”