Thursday, May 25, 2023 | A Chicago Tribune Publication

Hinsdale South students transform dilapidated school courtyard

Learned lessons in civics, construction and horticulture

By George Wiebe

For years the center of Hinsdale South High School lie in a ramshackle courtyard, nearly untouched by the staff and students.

In 2022 a class of civics students set out on a restoration plan to revitalize the grounds; the students began engaging the community, appealing to the local government to invest in its improvement and making connections with businesses to provide supplies and crew.

Students and grounds crew had spent time clearing the area of excess foliage, dead bushes and vines were cleared, grass was cut and trees were trimmed.

"This entire area was overgrown ... you couldn't see the back walls," Kathy Lencioni, Social Studies department chair at Hinsdale South said. "Before we even touched ground today it looks better than it ever had in my 19 years here."

On Thursday, May 18, a year of planning came to fruition, the crew went to work and the corporate and community sponsors students had spent time cultivating showed up.

Home Depot, as part of their community outreach program, provided thousands of dollars in tools, mulch, and crew as several Darien Home Depot employees volunteered their time to assist the students, Ozinga donated and laid out concrete, and the Darien Rotary Club and Hinsdale South Booster Club donated funds to the project.

Home Depot has a history of community involvement, Home Depot employee and volunteer worker Barbara Schnee said.

"If you take care of your people they will take care of you," Schnee said

Darien Mayor Joseph Marchese, who had been a strong supporter of the student's efforts, came out to witness all the work.

"This is the fun part of being mayor of Darien, you get to do stuff like this," Marchese said.

The goal is to make the courtyard a more inviting place, where teachers can bring their classes, and students can hang out, Lencioni said.

The day's work was extensive, the grounds were repaved, new vegetation was planted, picnic tables were set up for where none had been and a sensory garden for the school's special needs department was constructed.

All the students had their own role to play, one of the students on the original project team, Sami Khalil, was part of community outreach and made the initial connections with Home Depot that catapulted the renovations.

Students were put on outreach, security, "red tape" teams, Khalil said. "They had different roles and they put a lot of different skills and efforts together."

Khalil, like many of the students that took part in Thursday's renovations, is a senior and will not personally benefit from work put into the school, but that was never a deterrent from taking action.

"I'm going into political science, I want to be a civil servant, and to me I think sowing the seeds that future generations can reap brings so much more happiness to me," Khalil said. "I think about how I could be remembered as someone who built something instead of someone who destroyed something."



Hinsdale South students, Azarius (left) and Daniel (right), plant flowers in the courtyard on May 18. GEORGE WIEBE/PIONEER PRESS PHOTOS

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Sami Khalil



Social Studies teachers Kelly Van Hout (1) and Kathy Lencioni (4), Hinsdale South students Noelle Waterman(2), Camden Kiefer(3), and Darien Mayor Joseph Marchese(5) pose in front of the renovated courtyard.