

Holy Spirit helps nature reclaim their bit of 'concrete jungle'



By Brock Weir

Paradise may have been paved to put up a parking lot in Joni Mitchell's world, but in the world of Holy Spirit Catholic Elementary School, paradise was asphalted over for a playground.

Paradise, however, experienced a bit of resurgence on Thursday afternoon as the school community put on their steel-toed boots, grabbed their crowbars, and reclaimed their space as a natural oasis.

Students, parents and staff were out in force with representatives of Windfall Ecology Centre and the Healthy Kids Community Challenge to transform a portion of their paved kindergarten yard from a swath of tarmac to an oasis of greenery and native trees, the latest in a long line of de-paving projects spearheaded in part by Windfall.

Nearly 80 individuals made quick work of the asphalt, removing 150 square metres of pavement to make way for Mother Nature to do her work.

'We gather here in a very particular way to reclaim nature and, in reclaiming nature, we reclaim, in a special way our relationship with God too,' said Father Frank McDevitt of the local Our Lady of Grace Catholic Parish before sending a group of students to splash holy water around the perimeter of the play area. '

The Holy Spirit community has been hard at work envisioning exactly what they want their revitalised 'oasis' to be for several months.

It was a project already in full swing when Principal Marlene Vickers arrived at Holy Spirit for the first time last month. Crediting the school's Green Team with tackling the project, she said it was all about giving kids a natural place to play.

'A lot of school yards have drainage issues and this is one of them,' she said. 'We revamped and revised [the plan] so we could get the area de-paved and still keep our shade structure, still have an area for the kids to play, and incorporate the whole vision of de-paving, mulching and the non-pavement areas for the kids to play. It is about how to give back and turn our world around from the concrete jungle that we have.'

Thursday's de-paving event was attended by a number of local dignitaries including Mayor Geoff Dawe, trustee Elizabeth Crowe, and superintendant Opiyo Oloya.

'This is such a wonderful opportunity for the community to come together as well for a project that will serve the needs of the kindergarten students,' said Ms. Crowe. 'Maybe in the future you can do some de-paving in the main yard. Many schools are doing this because it is great to bring some shade back to nature and let kids play in the dirt. I look forward to coming back and seeing the final results.'

This was a message driven home by Brent Kopperson, Executive Director of Windfall Ecology Centre.

When rainwater hits paved areas, it collects pollutants like salt and other detergents along the way before finding its way into the watershed. De-pave projects like this, he said, go a long way in re-setting the balance.

'When we de-pave areas, we're naturalizing them, we're creating a great and healthy play area and, at the same time, we're letting water absorb naturally into the ground the way nature intended,' he said. 'It is going to be great, and for all the kids [participating]

you will be able to come back here when you've got your own children and say, 'I built this.' Congratulations to you all. It will be transformed, it will be magnificent, and it will be a great accomplishment for you all.

According to Windfall, this de-pave event is the first of two phases in store for Holy Spirit that will transform the school yard. In addition to increasing the green space in the yard, the new gardens, trees and permeable surfaces will work to benefit local bodies of water.

Prior to the event, Holy Spirit's kindergarten yard was nearly 100 per cent paved, said Andrea Fallone, Program Manager at Windfall. By [transforming this] we're allowing rain to absorb into the ground naturally, preventing polluted storm water run-off from reaching our local waterways untreated.

Sponsors for Holy Spirit's de-paving event included the Great Lakes Guardian Fund for funding, with additional collaborative support from the school itself, the York Catholic District School Board, GWF Construction, Gro-Bark, Evergreen, the Town of Aurora, the Aurora Lions Club, Treasure Mills, Rent Source Aurora, Green Communities Canada, and Depave Paradise.