

Heerman's Tarweed flower



Once Upon a Wetland



On a sunny afternoon, a small group of observant third graders make their way across an open meadow, smelling the smells and attending to shiny blue beetles along the path. Suddenly, one student at the head of the group spins around and signals for the others to be quiet. He points ahead toward the tall, majestic figure of a great egret. The slender white bird is apparently not bothered by the children, and is picking its way slowly over the land, scanning the ground for food. The children are initially spellbound and unmoving, just watching. A quiet discussion then ensues, and the group decides to move only with the bird, so that they won't scare it away.

As the bird continues its careful progress, the children begin to move too, synchronizing their every step with the egret's own ginger and deliberate footfalls, mimicking each undulation of its sinewy, long neck. The great bird stops. Pause. Everyone stops. Waiting. The egret steps forward again, re-initiating this game of follow the leader, and the students follow. Suddenly, without warning, the bird takes two large steps, stretching its wings open, and all at once the children take flight, arms outstretched, soaring over the field together.

This unprompted game of *follow the egret* arose spontaneously from children feeling connected to nature, capturing their attention, as well as their hearts. Moments like this highlight the invaluable

relationship that is developing between Oak Grove School and the Ojai Meadows Preserve.

The Ojai Meadows Preserve (OMP) is a public open-space owned by the Ojai Valley Land Conservancy, a local non-profit organization. The OMP comprises 58 acres of non-native grassland and a large eucalyptus grove, but a historic oak woodland is being replanted and a restored wetland area is burgeoning forth. This open-space area is situated adjacent to Nordhoff High and Meiners Oaks Elementary Schools, and is just down the street from Oak Grove School. After only a few minutes walking along winding trails, Oak Grove students easily find themselves at the preserve, and in a whole new world of ecological relationships.

According to local old-timers, the meadow once harbored a wetland so wet that you could row a boat across it during a rainy winter. At one time the meadow preserve was a healthy oak woodland, teeming with life. However, the parcel was cleared for cattle around 1900; alfalfa was cultivated to feed livestock, and the land was repeatedly disturbed by humans as it was slated for development. Then, about six years ago, the Ojai Valley Land Conservancy acquired the property and designated it a nature preserve, protecting it forever.

Since then, a Nordhoff High School project effectively redirected runoff from its entire school campus onto the OMP. The native seedbank from the old wetland environment had remained dormant but viable in the soil, and with the addition of this water from the Nordhoff campus, the historic wetland instantly sprang back to life and is continuing to expand today. Just add water.

Already the meadow is coming alive, attracting a cavalcade of feathered friends like red-winged blackbirds, herons, hawks, bluebirds, robins, killdeer, sparrows, meadowlarks, kites, and egrets. Not to mention the chorus of toads and tree frogs in the wetland or the surprise lizard or snake encountered on the trails.

Restoration of the OMP is no small task and will be ongoing for years to come, but by engaging the neighboring schools, the project has become one of those rare opportunities for building community around a shared natural place that is everyone's backyard.

With the new addition of an environmental and outdoor coordinator, students and faculty at Oak Grove School have been especially involved with this restoration project.

The school year starts with acorn collecting, getting to the acorns before the winter rains. "It's like an Easter egg hunt!" one excited toddler proclaimed. Students also help to collect and propagate seeds from native plants in the valley. This year students were able to propagate more than 3,500 plants, including coyote brush, monkey flower, sedges, buckwheat, mule fat, heart-shaped penstemon, and black and purple sage to name just a few.

Valley Oak leaves



Using the student-built strawbale greenhouse to propagate these native seedlings, the children track the progress of their little green babies, caring for them in the greenhouse, and transplanting them as they outgrow their pots. Eventually, when the plants have grown big and strong, the students take them out of their greenhouse nursery and plant them in the ground on the OMP, keeping an eye on which plants are happiest and where. Older students also help with the removal of invasive plant species on the OMP. They dig up Bermuda grass and non-native rye, as well as castor bean and curly dock plants in order to make room for the incoming native grasses, shrubs, and trees.

In a time where many children prefer to play indoors because, "that's where all the outlets are," (Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods*), the outdoor and environmental programs at Oak Grove School foster genuine and lasting relationships between students and the world outside of the classroom.

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Students prepare future meadow plants in Oak Grove's strawbale greenhouse.



Grants Support New Programs

Oak Grove has received a \$40,000 grant from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to expand the school's student-based restoration and stewardship project.

The new program will provide watershed experiences to students at Oak Grove, Meiners Oaks Elementary School, and Nordhoff High School through restoration and stewardship of the historic wetland. It will raise awareness about the importance and value of a healthy watershed, emphasizing the intrinsic ecological relationship of all things within the watershed and the direct connection of the watershed to the local ocean environment. The project curriculum offers students experience with authentic scientific monitoring and habitat restoration. Other stewardship activities may include: water quality monitoring, soil sampling and testing, seasonal photo-documentation, wildlife surveys, plant success rate monitoring, local weather and climatic conditions monitoring, invasive plant removal, native seed collecting, native plant propagation, native plant planting, litter removal and preserve patrolling.



A \$10,000 grant from A+ for Education will help Oak Grove expand environmental science curriculum and install a 12-module 2kW ground mount solar system in its demonstration garden. The solar system will be grid tied, spinning Oak Grove's electric meter backwards, and reducing contribution to greenhouse gasses by thousands of pounds per year.

The demonstration garden site models sustainability. It's located on a south-facing slope for maximum solar gain. Water is kept on site by collecting rainwater and storing it in a tank and a pond, with the use of swales (ditches dug along a contour and planted up the lower side) and by heavily mulching the bare ground. Students and staff compost vegetable and fruit scraps from school lunches and use the compost to fertilize the organic garden. They also make liquid feed from the comfrey on site. The solar addition takes this sustainable model one step further.

Through this grant, Oak Grove will also add the Knowledge is Power Energy Education Program, a four-part energy curriculum developed by collaboration between the Ojai Valley Land Conservancy, Ojai Solar Electric Company and Ojai Unified School District.

Once Upon a Wetland, cont.

In addition to working and playing out on the Ojai Meadow Preserve, students spend time discovering just what a wetland really is, what watershed they live in, and why these things matter in an interconnected ecological system. Teachers and students explore the importance of managing water locally, observing the scale of runoff at their own school, and then devising and implementing methods for slowing, spreading and sinking all the water that falls on the campus grounds.

This locally-based, experiential approach to learning gets children outside, interacting with nature in a meaningful way that develops a sense of place. Students feel connected to their immediate surroundings. The neighborhood fields and meadows are imbued with a feeling of home. And it is natural to want to take care of your home.

The environmental projects at Oak Grove School allow students to make real, measurable impacts on the environmental health of their own backyards. This, in turn, builds a confidence and courage that allows them to be comfortable and participatory in the greater world. By witnessing their progress in restoring the wetland, or by making contributions to the sustainability of the school campus, students begin to develop the social and environmental consciousness that can empower them to participate in the public debate on environmental matters. Students develop the confidence that indeed they can make a difference globally, by taking simple actions locally.

—by Sara Benjamin

Sara is the Environmental Coordinator at Oak Grove School. She holds a master's degree in marine geochemistry, a bachelor's degree in earth systems, and works extensively supporting sustainable practices in the Ojai Valley and beyond.

Students plant native grasses and shrubs in the Ojai Meadows Preserve.



Blue Milkweed Beetle



alumni NEWS&NOTES

From Alumni Association President: Uschi James

It's Time to Reconnect!

Greetings, Oak Grove alumni. To those of you I have not met or seen in a long time, I spent some very meaningful years at Oak Grove from 1983 to 1990. My Mom, Irmgard, has worked at the school for many years as a chef, houseparent, and as food coordinator for the Krishnamurti dialogues. Oak Grove has always felt like a second home to me, even when I wasn't attending school here.

After years working in high-fashion retail, I came back to Ojai and made some big changes in my life. I completed yoga teacher training and decided to take a position cooking the hot lunches at our school with my Mom. I now divide my time between teaching yoga at Lulu Bandha's in Ojai, working at the Oak Grove kitchen and teaching yoga to the high school students.

I have always felt connected to this beautiful school and to the time I spent here. My closest friends are alumni with whom I have stayed in contact with all these years. Even though I didn't graduate from high school here, I feel that all of us who have attended Oak Grove are an extended family of sorts.

We are now working to establish an Alumni Association that will reconnect us to this beautiful place, and to each other! We need help from all of you to find out where you and your friends are, and what they are up to in life. Our goal is to emphasize the impact Oak Grove has had on our lives. Please visit the school website at www.oakgroveschool.com/alumni, or email me: luckyuschi@yahoo.com. I look forward to hearing from you!



Some faces from our intimate, yet fun-packed 2005 alumni reunion.



Erick and **Sarah (Rupp) Gardon** are pleased to announce the birth of their son, Elouan, May 8, 2006, 12:26 pm at home at the Land of Medicine Buddha Retreat in Soquel, California. Sara attended Oak Grove School for 10 years and graduated in 1996.

Leif Dautch has just completed a summer internship at the Department of Justice in Washington DC. A senior at Yale, he is preparing for his LSAT's and getting ready for law school. Leif attended Oak Grove from preschool to his graduation in 2004. His three siblings, Chloe, Elissa and Ian, are currently at Oak Grove. According to his father, BD, Leif still makes time for music, sports, and to enjoy life.

Nandini Lee, who attended Oak Grove from its beginning through 8th-grade (before high school construction) graduated from medical school at St. George University in New York on June 17. She has started her residency in psychiatry at the University of Connecticut Medical Center.

Abby Lowe, 1990 to 2000, has graduated from UC Berkeley and is working as a teacher/coach with Sports4Kids, a non-profit, supporting non-competitive games and after-school programs for low-income children in the San Francisco Bay Area. She is soon moving to Boston to continue this work at another elementary school.

Rashel Burton recently participated in the Mount David Academic Summit at Bates College, where she is a senior. Rashel graduated in 2003.

Jin Koh, a residential student from Korea (1996 to 1998) has graduated from the Parson's School of Design in New York and is busy painting, looking toward graduate school, and working at Starbucks. His web site is www.r3ds.com.

Devon Johnson (1980-1988) graduated from UCLA with a PhD in Sociology in 2002. After a year doing post-doctoral research at Harvard University, Devon accepted a tenure-track position at George Mason University in Fairfax, VA, where she is assistant professor of Administration of Justice. Her research and teaching focuses on public opinion about crime and the criminal justice system, racial attitudes and relations, and crime policy.