



*Seagull Spirit!*

Neah-Kah-Nie School District No. 56

## NEHALEM ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

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*Kristi Woika, Principal  
Karen Wheeler, Secretary*

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April 24, 2019

To: The Neah-Kah-Nie School Board

Nehalem Elementary School would like to honor Erin Derr as the Neah-Kah-Nie School District Volunteer of the Month. When we talked about this honor at a staff meeting, Erin's name came up over and over as someone we wanted to publicly appreciate.

Erin has been instrumental in getting our Garden Science program off the ground and running. Our school garden had been mostly ignored for a few years until Erin and her family took it over. She joined our school garden committee, began putting many hours in outside to get the garden weeded and in shape, and earned her Master Gardener certification. She has twice asked for and received donations from the Nehalem Bay Garden Club to buy supplies and materials needed for the garden. Erin is a go-getter who has planned and gotten an outdoor classroom area built this spring to hold Food Roots garden science lessons in. It's a beautiful space!

As you can see, Erin has positively impacted Nehalem Elementary's students and staff with her work in the garden. This year she has even jumped into the classified and certified substitute pools and is working often in our school.

Thank you, Erin, for giving so much of yourself to Nehalem Elementary. We sure appreciate you!

Kristi Woika, Principal





Students at Nehalem Elementary School play a game in the garden to learn how pollination works.

## Garden Makeover Sprouts Hands-on Learning

*Elementary school takes classrooms outside for earth science lessons in a garden*

**By Denise Porter**

For a few years, the garden at Nehalem Elementary School sat and waited.

Much like Frances Hodgson Burnett's beloved tale of "The Secret Garden," this overgrown space needed someone to unlock its potential and revel in the magic a garden provides.

Thanks to a family's dedication, today children at Nehalem Elementary School are once again finding the joy a garden can bring.

"I noticed (the garden) was a bit disheveled—just lacking in attention," recalls Erin Derr of Garibaldi. "I asked what part it played in the larger school community. Did they use it for classes or

learning?"

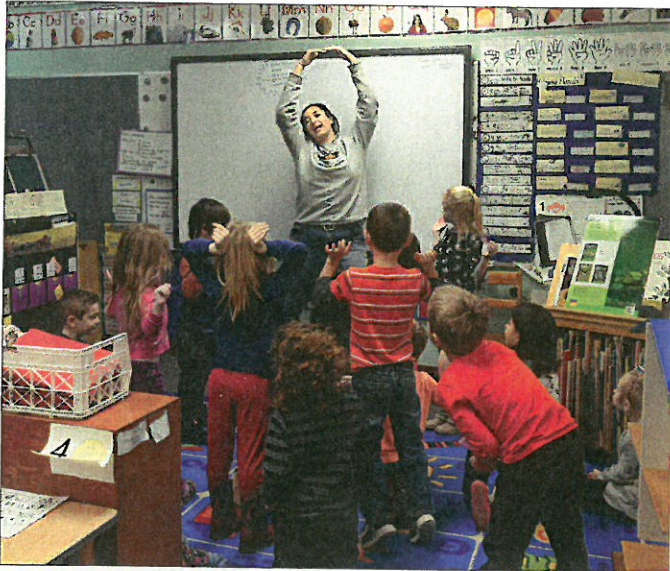
Erin learned that one school teacher, Kim Miller, was using the garden area to teach science with the younger grades. Kim was teaching decomposition lessons there. Otherwise, no one at the school was really teaching garden classes.

Erin says she could understand why. In 2016, when

she began asking about the garden, it needed care and attention.

Erin rolled up her sleeves and got to work. The past two years, she and her husband, Benjamin, and their two children, Brennan and Delaney, have rebuilt all but one of the seven garden boxes. Time and coastal storms had rotted the wood.





**Julia Yost of the Food Roots cooperative teaches students about plant life cycles and what seeds need to grow into plants.**

Photos by Erin Derr

The family also replaced the garden fence and spent hours in the garden pulling morning glory and horse tail out.

"I had to go weed every couple of days," Erin says. "Now we've finally won the battle, and so it's so nice."

The Derrs were new to the area in 2016 when Erin began asking about the school garden.

"We'd been here a year, and I was getting more involved and sticking my nose into the parent council," Erin recalls.

Erin and Benjamin moved to Garibaldi in 2015 from Southern California. She says they wanted to live on the coast. After careful consideration, they chose a home in Garibaldi so their children would attend the Neah-Kah-Nie School District. Brennan is at the middle school. Delaney is at Nehalem Grade School.

The school garden was started by Charlene Gernert and her family. The Gernerts secured a grant for a school garden and tended it while their children were active at the school.

Erin says school gardens generally don't get funded through school districts. They require volunteers to make them bloom. After Charlene moved on, no one stepped up to help with the garden and it remained dormant, waiting for another family to take on that volunteer role.

Erin felt she was just the right person. Not only was she looking for volunteer activities to immerse herself in her new community, she had a fondness for gardens and all things pertaining to science.

"I have a degree in biology," she says. "My background is in science. My underlying interest is to facilitate more

science learning."

She says a garden teaches about life cycles, composting and the nitrogen cycle, among other things.

In a school garden, children "can learn so many different things depending on their age," Erin says.

The parent council at the grade school started a garden committee, but the school was in need of seismic upgrading. Because of maintenance work on the outside of the building, "we really couldn't get to the garden for a year," she says.

Undaunted, Erin says she decided to take this delay as an opportunity to learn and look for community partners to help make the garden thrive.

First, Erin began Master Gardener classes at the OSU Extension Service in Tillamook. The classes are science oriented and discuss the "breeding of plants and plant disease," she says.

Erin got her Master Gardener certification, "thinking it would better help me," she says. "I wasn't versed in this growing environment."

Nehalem Grade School is somewhat sheltered from oceanic winds, but the cooler marine climate on the coast meant Erin had to learn about growing cool-weather crops.

While living in Ohio for a year, Erin grew a big garden.

"It was very easy," she recalls of the hot summer days.

She admits the cool climate here was daunting.

Next, the school's parent council began looking for donation partners to offset

the material costs of rejuvenating the garden. Twice they asked for a donation from the Nehalem Bay Garden Club, and twice the club awarded a donation to the school. Warrenton Home Depot donated soil for the growing beds.

"We couldn't have done it without them," Erin says.

Lastly, Erin began looking for how to help teachers at the school use the garden in their curriculum. She turned to Food Roots, an area nonprofit dedicated to local gardening.

In January, Julia Yost of Food Roots began visiting the school monthly to teach all nine classes—approximately 200 students—about plant life cycles and gardening techniques.

It took two years of planning to reach this stage.

"It's nice to see it's finally coming to fruition," Erin says.

This spring, Erin anticipates the students will really begin to get "lessons in the dirt," she says. "They'll be outside and getting dirty."

Erin says the hard part is over, and now the kids can really begin to experiment.

"We're asking them, 'What would you like to grow?'" she says.

As for Erin's part in the garden, she and her family intend to help with the summer caretaking so the area stays weeded and in top shape when students return in the fall.

"I've stayed with it and adopted the garden," Erin says. "It's become a family project." ■