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Litter Bugs School

So Roberts pupils and teachers attack the blight in Elmwood Park

June 18, 2003

By **Mark Weiner**
Staff writer

Eight-year-old Erik Bennett spotted the blue plastic bag from Wal-Mart under a bush in Syracuse's Elmwood Park and immediately brought it to his teachers Tuesday morning.

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"Look, I found a bag with bottles of motor oil inside," said Bennett, a second-grader at Roberts School, where pupils have turned the park into a living laboratory. "I think whoever put it there was waiting for somebody else to pick it up."

Indeed, second-graders and kindergartners at the school received a firsthand lesson on the nature of litter Tuesday.

The pupils and their teachers organized a 90-minute "litter blitz" to clean up trash discarded by others at the 68-acre park in Syracuse's southwest corner. A path leads from the school grounds on Glenwood Avenue to the park.

Starting at 10:30 a.m., 47 pupils and 10 teachers, parents and aides took off into the park in a frantic search for litter. They concentrated on the land in and along the banks of Furnace Brook.

By the time they were done, the blitz team had filled part of five large plastic bags with papers, beer bottles, cigarette butts, a garden shovel and a lawn chair.

The idea of the cleanup was to celebrate the end of the school year and the end

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of the first year of the Neighborhood Opportunity Based Environmental Learning program, or NOBEL.

The program, sponsored by the Centers for Nature Education in Marcellus, seeks to introduce city teachers to elementary-age environmental education activities. It uses Syracuse parks as outdoor classrooms.

"When we came out here last year, a lot of teachers didn't even know this park was a resource," said Carol Stokes-Cawley, director of the NOBEL program. "Now it's kind of fun. The park is really being used."

Adele Toney, who along with Nina DeFio teaches second-graders at Roberts School, said the cleanup is the culmination of an academic year of environmental education programs in the park.

"We decided to make this a day of celebration and cleanup and stewardship of the park," Toney said.

She said staff and pupils adopted the park and plan to cement their relationship by applying to the National Wildlife Federation to certify the park under the Schoolyard Habitat Program.

"That way, we can integrate our knowledge of all the species of plants and animals in the park," Toney said.

Joan Siple's kindergarten class joined in the cleanup. Siple said her class adopted a big evergreen tree in the park this year, wrote a book about the tree and studied some of the more than 600 species of plants and animals scientists documented in the park this spring.

Toney said it's a trend that in the future will probably include more classes from Roberts School and perhaps other city schools.

"I think that more teachers at our school are realizing this is a fantastic resource right in our back yard," Toney said. "The kids have learned a tremendous amount about habitat and about plants and animals. The kids feel a sense of ownership and pride in the park now. They call it, 'Our park.' They're very comfortable here."

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