Litter Bugs School
So Roberts pupils and teachers attack the blight in Elmwood Park

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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.

"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
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 Sipley's kindergarten class joined in the cleanup. Sipley 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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