

ARTS

Hoping to plant 'love of gardening' seed in kids

Local author looks to spread message through book

By Stephanie Hounsell
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

Mary, Mary, quite contrary, how does your garden grow?

When it comes to the gardens local teacher and author David Barnes plants with his students, more than silver bells and cockleshells spring to life. Important values such as responsibility, patience and a nurturing attitude blossom alongside the flowers and trees.

That, in turn, bodes well for everyone.

"If kids grow up with nurturing, caring attitudes, we'll have a better society," Barnes said.

Several years ago, this new Milton resident — he moved to Hawthorne Village six months ago with his wife and two young children — decided to write a children's book about his passion for nature, and in particular, the benefits of gardens.

Two years ago, 'My School is Alive!' was published.

Now, with gardening season in full bloom, Barnes is hoping to spread his message to his new community through the book and a new teachers' manual he recently created.

"How can we make the future a better place? This is a tiny way, but it's significant," Barnes said.

Intended for children in grades 1 to 6, 'My School is Alive!' is based on the true story of a garden project Barnes undertook at his school. It follows a fictitious student as she helps create a garden for the entire school to enjoy.

It serves as an informative and inspirational text for students, teachers and parents who want to begin their own garden project — which is Barnes' hope. And it's received positive reviews from sources including The Canadian Children's Book Centre.

The learning garden project started out simply enough.

Barnes, who was teaching grade 2 at a North York school, decided to plant a small butterfly garden with the kids. Before long, a piece of land that nobody looked twice at was getting lots of attention.

Every day, his students would visit to see



PLANT PASSION PENNED: David Barnes holds a copy of his book 'My School is Alive!'.
GRAHAM PAINE / CANADIAN CHAMPION

what flower had bloomed or what bug they could catch. Soon, students in other grades took notice and wanted to get involved.

Over the next few years the garden grew, thanks to a grant from the TD Friends of the Environment Foundation.

"It became a huge project," Barnes said.

In its third year, a nature club with 150 students formed. Every lunch hour, some of those students would tend to the garden.

"Seeing the students loving it so much, I started to realize you can actually teach out here," Barnes said.

And that's what he did. Whether it was learning the biology of plants, measuring trees for math class or painting in the garden for art class, students loved learning there.

Around the fourth year, the whole school was involved.

Not only were students enjoying themselves, Barnes could sense their attitudes

changing too. As they cared for seedlings and nurtured tiny plants, they began to treat each other better, he said.

What started as a small project had become almost a movement, Barnes explained.

It was just too amazing to keep to himself. Barnes realized he had to write a book to share the experience with others.

Another of Barnes' lifelong passions is painting — Barnes is also an artist — so it was only natural that he do the illustrations as well as the writing.

Barnes sent the book to several publishers, but each time it was turned down. Although they liked the idea, they felt it wasn't profitable, Barnes said. That's when he decided to publish it himself.

"So far it's been well received," he said.

As summer approaches, he hopes parents will be motivated to garden with their chil-

dren. Not only is it a great way to learn, it's a way to spend quality time together, Barnes said.

The teachers' manual Barnes recently completed shows how to link the teaching of writing to the outdoor garden space the book encourages teachers and students to plant.

The program is still in its infancy stage, but there have been some bites, Barnes said, and he's excited. The Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources is offering free tree seed to schools that decide to follow the program.

Barnes is currently implementing the program where he teaches in Mississauga.

For a copy of Barnes' book or accompanying manual, contact him at dbarnes@onemorestoryplease.com.

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