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## Educator of the Year

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### *Susan Meehan of Nelson NH*

Susan Meehan has been a teacher at Symonds Elementary School in Keene NH for twenty three years. During that time she has been instrumental in creating an inspiring outdoor classroom where students and community members can interact with native habitat, participate in growing abundant vegetable gardens, and learn about natural cycles. The effort she has put into connecting students with the natural world in the classroom, and schoolyard, is commendable and the Conservation District is honored to recognize Susan Meehan as the 2015 Educator of the Year.

Susan always wanted to be a teacher. When she was in sixth grade she started volunteering at a Head Start and this volunteer work laid a foundation and a love for teaching and working with youth. Before her time at Symonds School she received her bachelors in General Education from Keene State College and went on to receive her Master of Education from Keene State College in Special Education and Learning Disabilities. From there she worked at Benjamin Franklin Elementary School in Keene, as well as Jaffrey Grade School, as a Special Education teacher.

In 1992 Susan started at Symonds as a second grade teacher, then moving into first grade. This move from Special Education to a traditional classroom environment was a challenge because it is more structured. When she was at Franklin

teaching Special Education she had the freedom to organize field trips and be out in the community with the kids each week. Her focus was on Project Based Education. It was at Franklin School where Susan started to incorporate gardening into the classroom. She would work with children to start seeds and grow plants that would later be sold to community members for fundraisers.

At Symonds School she found ways to expand the regular curriculum to include gardening and project based education. As a second grade teacher the plants and soils unit allowed her to delve into this. She would start plants in the classroom and allow the kids to take them home. They would do experiments with changed variables to help the students embrace science. They would even start potatoes on St. Patrick's Day. Susan shared that one little girl brought her a picture in the fall of a whole bowl of potatoes she grew over the summer. Susan is the kind of teacher that inspires her



students to get their hands dirty, explore, and learn from their experiences. She also had a worm bin composting system in the classroom and would take students on field trips to Stonewall Farm.

In 2004 a group of parents approached Susan about their interest in seeing an outdoor classroom at Symonds School. With support from the principal, a committee of parents, teachers and staff at Symonds came together to integrate a garden into the playground area so children could spend their time interacting with nature. Susan took the lead on writing grants and raising funds. She worked with the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department to get numerous years of matching grants to create the garden space with fundraising done in coordination with the PTA.

Susan shares that her goal of the garden was “to create a natural playground and increase students’ exposure to growing food and natural spaces.” In the beginning the focus was on habitat restoration and creating a refuge for local wildlife. All of the plants selected for the natural schoolyard are native and were grown in the northeast. Phase two of the garden was to create raised beds to grow vegetables. Susan, one of her interns, and a parent built all the raised beds. The goal of adding annuals to the native perennial gardens was something Susan was passionate about. Her intent was to have a place for students to dig and play in each year. Creating an opportunity to engage with the soil and life cycle from Spring to Fall.

The third phase of the garden was to install a Rain garden adjacent to the



raised bed boxes. This grew out of a training Susan attended on incorporating rain garden curriculum into the classroom at Antioch University New England. She had recognized an erosion problem in the ball field adjacent to the black top in the children’s play area where the soil was compacted and there were problems with standing water. Susan worked with the Conservation District on a grant to have a rain garden designed and installed at the site. This was a way to fix the resource concern and expand the native habitat in the play area.

## Educator of the Year continued

Students were involved with the planting and Susan worked with her interns to install artistic posts around the garden that had the poem *Welcome Rain on a Spring Night* written by Du Fu, who lived from 712-770 AD.

Heather Schlerf, a master gardener who is the cafeteria manager at Symonds School was a lead partner with Susan in the creation of the gardens. Heather shares that *"Susan had a vision and did a lot in a short period of time."* Susan emphasizes how the work on the garden space at Symonds is a community effort. Partners such as UNH Cooperative Extension made recommendations on plants and siting. Landscaper, Steve Key created a patio area and infrastructure. Students were involved with the planning of the garden from the very beginning. Through an artist in residence program their artwork was incorporated into the design to create a unique and beautiful space for children and the community.

Susan was there from the beginning planning stages of the garden and has kept it going for ten years. As the staff contact



Principal Richard Cate shared that "Susan worked tirelessly over many years to build and constantly improve the garden. She is responsible for writing grants, building raised beds, and fundraising. Most importantly she worked with the children, teaching them to garden and to value the result of their work. Our garden has grown to be an important and valued part of our school because of her leadership, vision, and hard work."

she was available to answer questions and work with parents interested in learning more. She has been the site supervisor for four interns from Antioch University New England who ran an after school garden club from 2009-2012. She has also volunteered one day a week with Project Keep, an aftercare program at Symonds School that utilizes the garden for some lessons and has the students help with watering and harvesting. Susan would be there as a garden mentor, someone who the children could go to with questions about growing food, composting, and more.

Susan is an amazing educator who has gone above and beyond the job description to foster a conservation ethic in her students. We are so pleased to honor her as the 2015 Educator of the Year!

***"Thank you Mrs. Meehan for Planting the Seeds of Knowledge."***

This can be found carved into a granite garden bench that sits amidst the landscape at Symonds Elementary