



WESTERN CUYAHOGA AUDUBON SOCIETY

CONNECT > EDUCATE > CONSERVE

The Cleveland Metroparks Zoo and Western Cuyahoga Audubon Connect Families with Nature

By Tom Romito, WCAS Board Member

What do you do with an elementary school, a zoo, and gung ho community partners? That's easy – start a nature club!

That's exactly what [Cleveland Metroparks Zoo](#) last year did when they got a grant from the [Association of Zoos and Aquariums](#) and the [Walt Disney Company](#). The goal was to connect students and families from an underserved nearby school with nature.

The [Cleveland Metropolitan School District](#) identified Walton School on [Cleveland, Ohio](#)'s near west side as the perfect fit for what became the Zoo Nature Club.

Fifty club members, including students from five to 13 years of age and their parents, participated in three after-school activities last fall at the Zoo, Brookside

Reservation, and the school and again in the spring. For many students, these were defining moments.

“They loved playing and rolling around in the grass at Brookside,” said Stacey Pantek, Zoo Education Specialist. “This was an outdoor experience they had never had an opportunity to enjoy before.”

The culminating event of the school year for the club was beautifying the courtyard at Walton School. Club members gathered after school on April 22 to clean up the courtyard. The Zoo provided tools for the job and Western Cuyahoga Audubon Society provided pizza to reward everyone for their efforts.

On May 12, club members gathered again to plant the gardens in the courtyard. Olmsted Falls Garden Club donated perennials, including hostas, daisies, ground covers, and day lilies.

Western Cuyahoga Audubon purchased annuals from a local Boy Scout troop and also purchased native perennials. Western Cuyahoga Audubon lent another hand by buying and coordinating the delivery of 150 bags of mulch from Home Depot. Club members laid two inches of mulch on all three gardens once the planting was completed. Once again, everyone enjoyed pizza at the end of the afternoon.

Western Cuyahoga Audubon members coordinated the efforts for the courtyard and supervised club members, some of whom had no gardening experience. Members and friends who helped with the project were Michelle Manzo, Audrey Goebl, Terry Duncan, Tom Romito, and Suzanne Rafferty.

A big payoff for the club came when teachers at the school saw the results of the project. Juliana Cole, Walton’s Dean of Student Engagement, said they acknowledged the club’s contribution to the beautification of the courtyard.

Juliana also noted the benefit of the partnership. “The club built rapport between club members and the Zoo,” she said.

Michelle Manzo noted that the project achieved the goal of connecting families with nature to build lifelong conservation values. “I hope the kids will be able to watch the garden grow and know they made a difference,” she said.

So what’s the future of the Zoo Nature Club? Stacey Pantek said the Zoo is going for another grant and wants do something different, but still nature-oriented.

“Possibilities include composting, recycling, mural painting and trips to other parks,” Stacey said.