

Awards, Icing on the Environmental Cake

By Melissa Rooney
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On May 30, I had the privilege, for a second year, of attending the Annual Awards Ceremony of Durham's Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) at the Redwood Ruritan club. Last year, I attended as the parent of the first-place winner of the 5th grade poster contest ('Wetlands are Wonderful'). This year, I attended as an associate supervisor on the SWCD board and was accompanied by my daughter and her 6th grade Lowe's Grove science teacher, Samuel Brown (several of whose students won contests in their divisions under the theme "The Water Cycle is the Cycle of Life").

Every year, the SWCD's poster, essay, public speaking, and slide-show contests are open to all 3rd through 6th grade students. Each first place student wins \$50, and their teachers win \$30; second place students win \$25. At both events, I was surprised just how few teachers and home-schoolers (every parent is at least a part-time home-schooler, right?) participated in this free annual contest, which certainly fits within many grades' science curricula. The kids LOVE to create the posters/essays/slide-shows, and they are thrilled to actually win money rather than a plastic trophy or certificate. Winners' projects go on to compete at the state level, and Durham always has several state finalists.

The awards banquet is icing on the cake for these kids and their families and a great intro to how our society is encouraging sustainability and protecting our natural resources. Like every year, this year's award-winners and their parents were honored with a good southern-style buffet dinner, complete with ice-tea and home-made banana pudding for dessert. By nature of the program, many attendees had never met one another, but the atmosphere was one of true community and common purpose.

The SWCD presents awards to adults in different categories as well. This year, the "Urban Conservationist of the Year" award particularly drew my attention. The award went to "South Durham Green Neighbors" (SDGN), an all-volunteer organization that has sponsored discussion courses since Fall of 2010. In addition to adopting Third Fork Creek through Durham Stormwater's program, last year these folks discovered a course on the internet about Local Watersheds, took the course, and were so impressed that they adapted the course now called 'Knowing Our Local Watersheds and offered it free to the public. Twelve local people enrolled in this book-club-style course, where participants read material as preparation for discussion at weekly classes. At the end of the course, the group chose and heard from a local speaker, who is knowledgeable about local watersheds, issues of pollution from run-off, and how individuals can help rectify pollution of Jordan Lake and the streams that feed it. The final session is a field trip to relevant local sites (water treatment plants, neighborhood ponds or wetlands, etc.).

I was impressed with the inclusion of hands-on ways to put the knowledge taught to practical use, and I saw great potential for middle and high-school kids as well as adults to obtain free practical knowledge and experience that would certainly benefit any resume or college application. Environmental science/engineering and sustainable development is fast becoming a necessity and is certainly a good direction for future employment.

The SDGN is offering this course again this January (2014) at Southwest Library and is encouraging parent-child (6th grade and up) combinations to enroll. For home-schoolers, this should be a no-brainer. But parents whose kids go to public, charter, or private schools should also jump at this opportunity to spend quality time with their kids while improving both parties' knowledge of environmental science and community involvement, not to mention their resumes.

All too often it seems we have forgotten that education is not just about regurgitating literacy, math and science concepts in the classroom. It should also be about teaching kids how to become good citizens. Participating in this free 7-session course is a multi-faceted step in the right direction for adults as well as parents and their children.

You can find out more about this local waterways course via Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/SDGreenNeighbors>) or by contacting Ann Deupree directly at anndeupree@alumni.duke.edu.

For more information on the free SWCD contests and programs available for Durham youth and adults throughout the year, including Durham County Envirothon teams and 3rd grade Environmental Field days (October 8-10, 2013), contact Jennifer Brooks at jbrooks@dconc@gov (919-560-0558).

And if you are interested in adopting a Creek or waterway (or any part thereof), contact Laura Webb Smith, public education coordinator for the City's Stormwater Services Division, at (919) 560-4326, ext. 30235 or via email at Laura.Smith@DurhamNC.gov.