

Digging our Way Out

By Melissa Rooney

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In 2009, I became the Creekside Elementary PTA Grants Committee Chairperson – presiding over, well, me. I unsuccessfully applied for the American Academy of Dermatology grant providing shade structures for schools. This year a few parents volunteered to help, and we applied for a Lowe’s Toolbox grant, which we also didn’t get. Though we’ll reapply for these national grants, it is clear we should begin focusing on local funding.

Thanks to a heads-up from Ray Eurquhart, a long-time Durham Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) board member, in October I contacted the SWCD about the N.C. Community Conservation Assistance Program (CCAP), which funds up to 75% of qualifying stormwater management projects on public and private land. I was connected to Durham Watershed Conservationist Mike Dupree, who promptly began guiding me through the CCAP application process.

My goals were to minimize the mud that consistently enveloped the sidewalks and to eliminate the deep ruts in the track field, a physical threat to anyone attempting to use it as intended. Mike evaluated the site with an engineer and suggested several projects to improve the run-off plaguing our 5-year-old school, including installing a rain-garden, a 1000-gallon cistern, and/or a swale to redirect the rainwater pouring off the large impervious roofs and play areas. CCAP couldn’t fund grading and reseeding the field, but luckily Mike found alternative funding for this. The projects required completion within two months, before the 2010 funds were re-absorbed by the state. Despite omitting the swale and rain garden, our PTA still had to come up with ~\$5,000 and carry this cost for ~6 weeks after payment, when CCAP would reimburse them 75%.

Fortunately, a kindergarten parent, arborist David Hamm of Hamm’s Tree Service, happily agreed to remove a dying tree and dug most of the 8 x 8 foot hole for the cistern installation, gratis. Dan Danford, founder of Rainwater Conservation Systems, was likewise eager to work with us on the cistern installation, cost and labor. And Riley’s Landscaping adjusted their price and timeline to do the field project.

I couldn’t muster any volunteers and had to relocate the dirt from the cistern hole, myself. Students and teachers passed en route to and from lunch and recess, giving me plenty of opportunities to explain what I was doing and why.

After two days I was proud of the ache in my arms and the now hollow hole, but I was deflated to discover that the hole was about 2 feet short on each side. I returned the next day

with a pick-ax but quickly discovered my ineptness at digging frozen clay. On the verge of exhausted tears, I called Dan to ask his charge for digging the remainder, planning to pay for it myself. When I finished the call, I turned to see a slim young man standing behind me. His name was Joes (pronounced Ho-ez), and he worked at the school. I can't describe my relief when he offered to help. I watched, amazed, as he dug the rest of the hole in about 40 minutes. He even insisted on relocating the loose dirt, himself. Several days later, in freezing rain, Dan and his crew installed the giant rain barrel, and Mike finalized and submitted the paperwork just before the deadline.

I gave Joes the wooden 'token of appreciation' I received earlier from Keep Durham Beautiful, registering the exchange and my story with KDB via their website. Later that month Joes won the monthly drawing for a \$25 Whole Foods gift card.

I recount this experience for several reasons. First, I am disturbed that the site preparation for our school was so inadequate (resulting in considerable runoff problems within 5 years), that Durham has not demanded accountability from the development team, and that our school system does not take responsibility for the resulting liabilities. Second, I am distressed about the increasing need for school families to find external funding for necessities, resulting in further inequities among schools since they must rely on extracurricular parent/community involvement. I also want to thank Durham for providing a Watershed Conservationist to guide citizens through locally funded projects like this, and for their prowess in hiring Mike Dupree. And I want to highlight the good people who made these projects possible, particularly Joes and Hamm's tree service, which I hope Durhamites will reward with their business.

But perhaps most importantly, I want to broadcast CCAP and encourage Durham schools and citizens to look into such underutilized local programs. Thanks to a state grant, Durham Stormwater Services is providing 100% funding for qualifying rain garden installations in the Northeast Creek Watershed this summer and in the Third Fork Creek Watershed next summer. City residents in these predominantly South Durham areas should contact Robert Louque at Stormwater Services (560-4326, ext. 30215, or Robert.Louque@DurhamNC.gov) for more information.