

Howe Elementary: The Golden Shovel



Howe Elementary School has a golden shovel. This shovel doesn't haul mulch or turn soil. Instead it is displayed near the school office acknowledging the garden helpers that used other, more ordinary shovels to revitalize Howe's garden. Howe had a garden for years, but over time it fell into disrepair. The original beds were rotting and the space was overgrown. "The garden needed revitalizing. New engagement," explained school social worker, Anne Tobias-Becker.

That engagement came in all different shape and size. From the 4th and 5th grade students who planted seeds in their classroom to teacher Paul Hannemann who skillfully leveled the old beds to replace them with beautiful new cedar boxes and a watering system to keep the plants growing.

As Howe's garden grew, so did the number of helpers. Support from both of the district's high schools – East and West – brought encouragement, practical advice, and even some plants. "They sort of adopted us," said Howe teacher, Emily Villwock.

Soon the local media had caught the Howe garden bug. One station took roll of students enthusiastically, though perhaps haphazardly, planting in a garden bed. That bed now holds a special place of honor as it is dubbed, the "Kooky Garden."

Community partners like Live 54218 also stepped up to help renew Howe's garden. The health coalition featured the garden in the Incredible Edible Garden Tour, attributing its inclusion to the huge transformation it underwent.

Live 54218, along with other community partners, hosted a Garden Kick-Off with planting activities, produce tastings, and a fitness challenge. The event brought in over 100 students, parents, and staff.

Donna Pinckney and her two sons, Andrae and Brian, were at the garden kick-off and quickly volunteered to help care for the garden over the summer. "I was



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so glad that Live 54218 offered that opportunity for families,” said Pinckney. “In years past, I saw the garden growing and I never knew if it could be picked from. Then last year I signed up. I learned it was a school garden and families were able pick from it.”

Since both boys were in summer school on-site, the family took to checking the garden often. In addition to picking the ripe produce, the Pinckneys also inspected new growth and watered as needed. “The boys thought it was so cool,” said Pinckney. “Sometimes they liked getting wet more than watering the garden, but it was a lot of fun. We liked watching it grow.”

The Pinckneys commitment to the garden did not go unnoticed. The golden shovel hanging near the school office is awarded to the family who was the lead contributor to the garden success. For that reason, it is a picture of the Pinckney family hanging proudly next to the golden shovel at Howe Elementary School.

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