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Lessons in ecology connect Wheat Ridge students to their greenbelt

By Austin Briggs
YourHub Reporter

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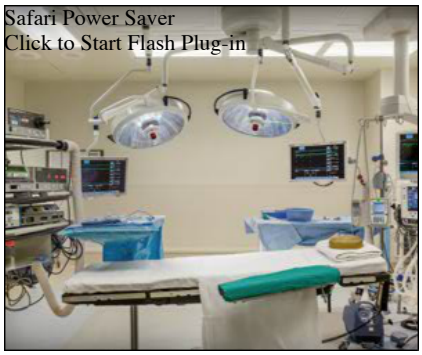

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WHEAT RIDGE, CO - APRIL 25: Sean Mangus, left, an intern with the Institute for Environmental Solutions, helps Marcos Ramirez, 10, to plant a tree on April 25, 2014, in Wheat Ridge, Colorado. Ramirez joined his classmates from Kullerstrand Elementary in planting sixty trees in a green belt not far ...

WHEAT RIDGE —Less than a mile from Interstate 70, singing birds, buzzing bees and chirping frogs along the Wheat Ridge greenbelt easily drown out the sounds of civilization.

The greenbelt covers 300 acres over a 6-mile stretch (http://www.ci.wheatridge.co.us/618/Trails-and-Open-Space) of Clear Creek and is home to beavers, deer, rabbit, red-tailed hawks and a multitude of other plant and wildlife species.

And now fourth-graders at Kullerstrand Elementary School — which is about ¼ mile south of the greenbelt — and third-graders from nearby Mountain Phoenix Community School have skills to help preserve what is almost all the open space in Wheat Ridge.

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Sean Mangus, left, an intern with the Institute for Environmental Solutions, helps Marcos Ramirez, 10, to plant a tree in Wheat Ridge. Ramirez joined his classmates from Kullerstrand Elementary in planting sixty trees in a green belt not far from their school. (Anya Semenoff, YourHub)

The students have been participating in a series of classroom workshops hosted by the Institute for Environmental Solutions (http://www.i4es.org/), a Denver-based nonprofit dedicated to finding solutions to complex environmental problems.

"We taught the kids about the ecology of the greenbelt and why it's important," said Carol Lyons, executive director of the nonprofit. "This is literally in their own backyard, and a lot of these students have never even heard of it."

In the first workshop, called the "Web of Life," students used string to connect to one another to learn what happens if parts of the ecosystem are lost. Then students had a workshop focused on trees in which they created storyboards and were encouraged to become stewards of the environment.

The workshops for the Kullerstrand fourth-graders culminated on April 25 when they went to the greenbelt and planted saplings along Clear Creek Trail.

Hunched over a peach willow sapling, 9-year-old Keyvan Gholipourgani said he planned to come back with his parents to water the tree.

"I've always been an outdoor type, and it makes me sad when people destroy the environment," Gholipourgani said. "It feels good to help out the environment."

As one group planted saplings, another went on a nature hike with Margaret Paget, forestry and open space supervisor for the city.

Paget said a concentrated wind and hail event in 2009 (http://www.i4es.org.previewdns.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Nonprofit-digs-in-to-revive-greenbelt-in-Wheat-Ridge-Your-Hub.pdf) wiped out hundreds of trees.

"Ever since then, we try to get some more (trees) planted every year," Paget said as she talked about different plant and animal species to the students.

Jennifer Dalton, a Kullerstrand fourth-grade teacher, said the students will have a final workshop where they will learn more about taking care of the trees.

"This project is just amazing," Dalton said. "It has an inherently built-in situation where they can come back, take care of the greenbelt and feel connected to their community."

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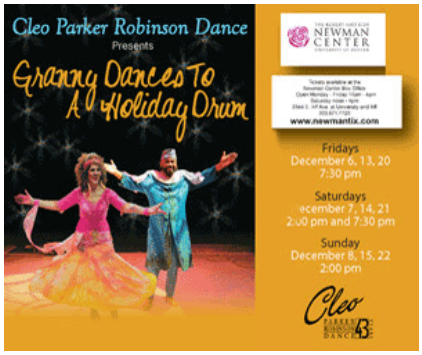

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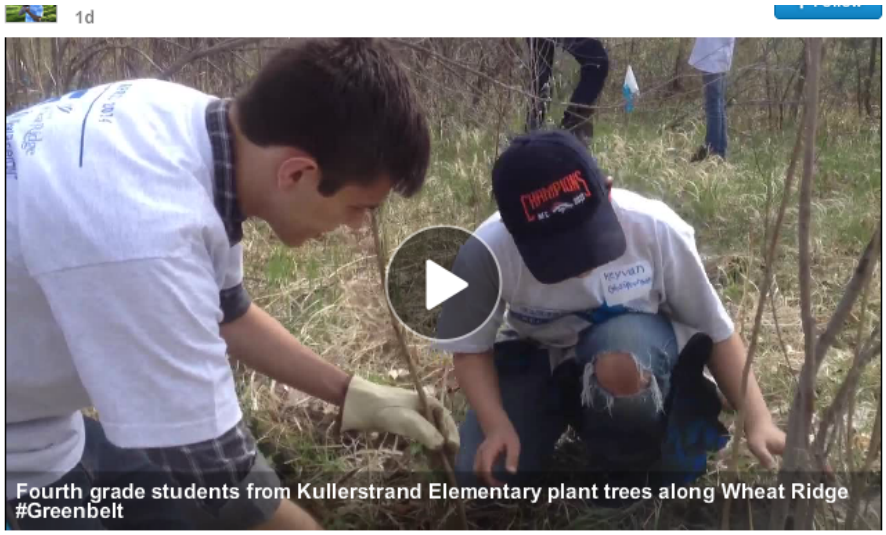

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