



*Mother, Aunt Annie
& Aunt Catherine
attended McDonogh
school in New Orleans.
Whether this one
mentioned in this
article is the same,
I don't know
LCS*

PHOTOGRAPHS: LINDA C. ASKEY

The garden at New Orleans' McDonogh 15 school supplies life lessons, as well as a bond between the school and the community.

A Schoolyard History

Communities embrace schools where their children spend their days. But what happens to schools where the children come from outside the community? In New Orleans' French Quarter, it doesn't seem to matter whose kids attend the school, the community gathers round.

Located among shops and residences with historic facades, McDonogh 15, an arts magnet school, was not always the darling of the neighborhood. In summer the weeds would grow—and so would resentment. Then along came Betty Norris.

"Betty showed up like a guardian angel and started pulling weeds," remembers principal Cynthia Hedge-Morrell. "She took students to gardens in the French Quarter that they had never seen before. So that gave the kids an idea of what was possible."

Meanwhile, the school received a \$500 grant from Camille and Bill Cosby through the National Coalition for Equality in Learning. And a

neighbor, landscape architect Chris Friedrichs, presented a garden plan.

As a resident active in organizations such as the Vieux Carré Property Owners, Residents and Associates and the Patio Planters, Betty mustered support from the neighborhood. Passersby would stop to inquire about the garden. Energetic workers came week after week, including two busy attorneys and a big-hearted retiree that everybody calls Granddaddy Jim.

Within the school, teacher Judith Darensbourg raised enthusiasm to



Teacher Chris Mayfield joins students Ben, Sophia, Ian, Cassie, Adam, Tiffany, and Warren at a pondside garden club meeting.

the level of action, organizing a garden club for students and encouraging parental involvement.

Today the garden is a center of energy for the school. The design of the garden is structured, but empty beds and a pond allow plenty of room for class experiments and projects. The children learn the names of native Louisiana plants, and they discover that nature rebounds, even after harsh winters like the one just past.

But the biggest impact has been outside of the school grounds. Because of the garden, neighbors have had the opportunity to invest personally in the school. The garden has helped cement the school as part of the community, and the support of the community sends a powerful message to students.

The principal smiles when she sees the garden club at work, older kids helping the younger ones. "You don't have to be the brightest child in the world," she observes. "Everybody can do something in that garden." *Linda C. Askey*