

Christa McAuliffe School Named Winner in Disney Nationwide Competition

The Walt Disney Company has announced Christa McAuliffe School as the statewide winner of Disney Plant Challenge, a project-based learning environmental competition for classrooms across the United States. Disney Plant Challenge teaches kids about science and conservation while empowering them to make a positive impact on their communities and planet.

In their project, students at the Christa McAuliffe School in Jersey City have partnered with the Jersey City Reservoir Preservation Alliance to raise awareness of Jersey City's Reservoir # 3 and create activities for schools and community groups who use the Reservoir as a field trip site. Students visited the reservoir and researched some of the more popular and interesting species of plants, trees, and shrubs found there. Armed with that information, students created a replica of the reservoir in their school's hallways, a brochure to promote the reservoir, and a scavenger hunt to test visitors' knowledge of its flora and fauna. Fourth grader Darien Minyetty said: "I had a really good time visiting the reservoir and learning about the plants that grow there. It was fun to make the reservoir in our school, and to inform all the people of Jersey City about what a great hidden treasure the reservoir is."

Students also created a website filled with links to their research about the reservoir's history and the plants, animals, and fish that live there, <https://sites.google.com/site/projectreservoir/home>. The student-created website also contains audio recordings of the student's research and a wiki where visitors to the site can post comments and questions. Students are testing the water from the reservoir for micro-organisms, providing a real world, "living classroom" for their studies. "Our students are learning to be passionate, driven, and knowledgeable about the environment in which they live. Also, in these hard times, a place of serenity is much needed. Reservoir # 3 is that place." said teacher Maria Smagalla. The project will continue throughout the spring months and will be expanded next year.

"The vision and energy here is amazing," said Steven Latham, President of the Reservoir Alliance. "Using scientific research, writing, art, and internet technology, students have connected with Jersey City history and nature. This groundbreaking project will be a template for creating programs with other local schools, an important Alliance goal."

To view pictures, please go to:

<https://picasaweb.google.com/jcreservoir/ChristaMcAuliffeSchool28ReservoirProject?feat=directlink>

For more about this story, please see the attached "Narrative: Project Reservoir."

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Narrative: Project Reservoir



It all started with a field trip. In late October, fourth graders from Room 118 and sixth graders from Room 224 had the opportunity to take a tour of Jersey City's Reservoir # 3, the "hidden jewel" of Jersey City. Located only blocks away from the school in the Heights neighborhood of Jersey City, none of the students had ever visited the reservoir before. Most of them didn't even know there was a reservoir behind the imposing stone walls surrounding the site. Walking through the entrance gate was like entering a fantasy world for the students...one that previously had existed only in books, pictures, and their imaginations.

Steven Latham, president of the Jersey City Reservoir Preservation Alliance, shared the history of the reservoir with us, noting that it was built in 1874, supplied water to Jersey City for almost a century, and finally ceased operations in the 1990s. The site fell into disrepair until nature gradually reclaimed the area. The original Egyptian Revival walls and Romanesque pump houses still stand, as a poignant reminder of our city's past. The Reservoir Preservation Alliance is working diligently to protect the reservoir from development, maintain the area as a natural retreat hidden away in the middle of the city, and promote the existence of the reservoir and the need to save the reservoir's lake, meadow, and woods from destruction and misuse. Within minutes of arriving, the Christa McAuliffe School knew we wanted to help.

Our students were astonished at the variety of flora and fauna that could be found tucked into the nooks and crannies of the reservoir. Upon passing a wild apple tree, many just had to try one of the tart little fruits, amazed to realize that apples really did grow on trees. Students mapped the location of numerous species of plants, trees, and shrubs, and noted the invasiveness of plants like ailanthus. They stood at the water's edge, took water samples to test for microorganisms back at school, and drank in the heady sight of the New York City skyline looming beyond the towering trees. Our students fell in love with the reservoir that day.

Back at school, the fourth graders and the sixth graders quickly partnered up and began to research the species they discovered at the reservoir. They became our very own "in house" experts who could teach you anything you wanted to know about the plants that grew in Reservoir # 3. As the weather grew colder, and foot upon foot of snow fell on New Jersey, our visits to the reservoir had to be put on hold. We figured, if we can't go to the reservoir, we'd bring the reservoir to us, and set about recreating the reservoir in the first floor hallway of our school. Students made 3D replicas of plants, trees, shrubs and even animals and posted their research nearby. Various teams worked to survey the rest of the school to determine if they knew about the reservoir, create a scavenger hunt game designed to test a visitor's knowledge of the wildlife of the reservoir, and, design a website containing an interactive map of the reservoir, complete with research pod casts recorded by our students.

And we're not finished yet...with spring on its way, the students of the Christa McAuliffe School will once again be returning to the reservoir. Our plan is to re-sample the waters to observe and analyze microbial changes. We are sponsoring a Community Education day in June where our students will be stationed at each of "their" plants, ready to share their knowledge with the friends and neighbors. We have embarked on a fundraising campaign to purchase signage for the reservoir; both at the entrance to proudly proclaim its existence, and at each of the plants we have identified and researched. Our next step is to investigate the feasibility of curtailing and/or eliminating invasive species, and researching the sustainability of introducing native species that are not currently growing in the reservoir.

Jersey City's Reservoir # 3 has been called the "hidden jewel" or the "hidden oasis" of Jersey City. Not if the students of the Christa McAuliffe School, PS # 28 have anything to do with it. Our goal is increase awareness of this unique natural resource among the people of Jersey City, develop curriculum and activities that can be used by schools throughout the city and county for on-site field trips, and assist the Jersey City Reservoir Preservation Alliance with developing the reservoir as a haven for city residents. With this project, we're well on our way!

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