Look What Popped Up at Lenoir Preserve!

Sarah Lawrence College's (SLC) Pop-Up Adventure Playground seemed like the perfect way to draw community awareness for the new bird and dragonfly nest, built this summer by Groundswell in Hudson Valley's Green Team at Lenoir Nature Preserve in Yonkers. And it certainly was.

On the sunny afternoon of October 20, more than 200 children and parents descended upon Lenoir, ready to let their imaginations run wild. Using found materials like cardboard boxes, string, bubble-wrap and fabric, they built robots and intricately furnished bat houses. When they came up for air, they ran around and explored the park, now peppered with colorful autumn leaves.

Many parents were surprised to learn that this pristine 40-acre Coast Land is right in their midst, with hiking trails, a butterfly garden, nature center and more, a habitat with observation decks for watching birds and dragonflies.

"This is my first time here," said Sara Gutman, who lives nearby in Yonkers. "My sister heard about the event happening here today and said ‘Let’s go! Let’s see what’s happening!’"

SLC’s Child Development Institute (CDI) brought three vans full of materials for unstructured free play for this Pop-Up Playground event. Two of them have hosted in the Yonkers area over the past five years.

"We are delighted to provide adventure play experiences like this, where children can express their creativity and test out new ideas using recyclable materials from their own communities," said CDI Director Amanda Blodewood. "When children are engaging in self-directed play, as they are here today, they are also taking initiative, exploring and developing their collaboration and problem-solving skills while having fun."

Yonkers City Council President Chuck Lomblick helped make the day a success, among other things, by transportation and getting word out through the schools and the community.

"Groundswell’s new hard and dragonfly-based tidy nest is still going strong at the beautiful Lenoir Preserve," Lomblick said. "Having two hundred children in the park turns this natural resource into a wonderful play area.

Groundswell Development Director Marji Malisik said, "Watching all of these children building and drawing and collaborating, as well as playing outside was truly inspiring. That off to the crew from Sarah Lawrence’s Child Development Institute for bringing this fun to our children. Marci and Janice Scherzer, supervisor of Transportation for Yonkers Public Schools, for bringing the kids. She volunteered to drive the bus, donated the bus for the day by Academy Bus Company.

Lisa Heben of Yonkers Public Schools and Mayor Mike Spano’s office also spread the word about the event. Donna de Castro, manager of Lenoir Preserve, helped coordinate the arrangements.

The new Lenoir exhibit, which includes a pond with an observation deck and bird ‘feeder’ was built this summer by the Green Team. Yonkers high school students employed by Groundswell to do community sustainability projects. Native plants that will attract birds and dragonflies were recently placed by a group of Groundswell’s youth and staff, as well.

Groundswell recruited an advisory panel of Yonkers students to help plan the project to meet the needs of the community and attract more visitors to Lenoir. It was financed through grants from Together Green, Hudson River Audubon and the Westchester County Parks department.