

Laura Bush sets roots in Boston

Touts citywide parks program

By Christopher Baxter, Globe Correspondent | June 23, 2008

Standing in the chandeliered parlor of the storied Commandant's House in Charlestown Navy Yard yesterday, Laura Bush announced the nation's first citywide program to introduce urban children to local history and the environment.

On the sprawling lawn of the 19th-century mansion, perched atop a hill overlooking Charlestown Harbor, students planted flowers, learned how to wind ropes, and examined bugs and leaves through magnifying glasses.

"My favorite part was composting because we got to play with worms," said 11-year-old Elizabeth Pardy, standing on one of four plots full of blooming, white echinaceas and bushes lush with pink roses and thorns. "We tried not to get pricked . . . but that didn't work out so well."

The activities were part of the First Bloom initiative, started last fall by Laura Bush with the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center to teach children the importance of being environmentally conscious. Boston will be the first city to start multiple First Bloom programs in one area, tied together by a shared history dating back to the American Revolution.

"The National Park Foundation's First Bloom program is giving children a personal stake in parks like the Charlestown Navy Yard," said Bush, speaking inside the former home of Navy commanders.

About 80 students from the Warren-Prescott School in Charlestown and the **Boys and Girls Clubs of Boston** took up garden gloves and shovels yesterday to add greenery and color to the oldest structure in the yard.

Rangers helped them carry potted flowers to the garden beds, and showed the children how to loosen roots and fill in soil. Osvarhele Guerrero, 12, lifted the top of a plastic container to show how worms turn trash like banana peels and watermelon rinds into rich fertilizer. "It has to be grown stuff, though," he said. "They won't eat just anything."

As a brief shower ended, the first lady arrived in a motorcade of sport utility vehicles. She spoke with children and listened as they told her what they had learned. She examined bugs that children had shaken off a hydrangea bush, kneeled in the grass as students wound pieces of string into rope, and helped plant echinacea seeds into small paper cups.

Vin Cipolla, president and chief executive officer of the park foundation, said Boston's concentration of urban national parks made it the perfect place to launch the expanded citywide First Bloom program.

"Often populations aren't around rural parks and city kids will never see them," said Cipolla, former chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. "We're trying to give kids a meaningful, national park experience where they live."

First Bloom - which made its debut in Texas and has been launched in New York, California, Pennsylvania and Washington, D.C. - is funded primarily by a \$1 million donation by Aramark, a leading concessionaire of parks, resorts, and hospitality services.

Sean Hennessey, spokesman for Boston National Historical Park, said he expected the other First Bloom programs around the region to begin in September. Sites include Saugus National Ironworks, Lowell National Historic Park, and the John F. Kennedy Birthplace in Brookline.

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