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Mobile Bay

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building a nest for science

It was a teacher's dream come true. Longtime educator Charlene Dindo conceived the idea for her ideal science lab, then she worked with an architect to create the plans, ordered the equipment she would need, determined the curriculum she would teach—and a state-of-the-art classroom was born to, as she says, "integrate science in a meaningful way for young students."

Not many teachers are given such opportunities, and Dindo—a kindergarten teacher in Mobile County public schools for 18 years and a recipient of the Krista McAuliffe Award for teaching—knows she's lucky. The Pelican's Nest Science Lab at the Fairhope K-1 School was made possible thanks to a group of concerned parents who formed the Fairhope Educational Enrichment Foundation and who undertook building the science lab as their first project.

The foundation started with an idea to build a fairly simple science lab on the K-1 campus in the heart of Fairhope, but soon the idea evolved into "a huge project," says Cindy McBrearty, the president of FEEF's board of directors. The project grew into a community-wide effort, from planning to construction to landscaping. Another board member, Gina Walcott, an architect and partner in the Fairhope firm Walcott Adams Verneuille, designed the building that houses the Pelican's Nest—an inviting structure with a tin roof, painted bright teal with yellow doors.

"It wasn't easy, but we had a lot of hard workers," says Charlene Dindo. "We were determined. Most people are impressed that such a new foundation accomplished this much in such a short time." After the foundation formed in January of 1996, it broke ground on the Pelican's Nest by September. Dindo spent her first year writing grants for the foundation and giving presentations to increase awareness of the project in the community.

At the Pelican's Nest, Dindo has been introducing young students to the wonders of Mobile Bay for the past two school years. Her enthusiasm for teaching, for science, and for education in general is contagious. "Wanna play with some fish?" she asks almost immediately when a visitor enters the facility.

Students from all over Baldwin County—from both public and private schools—are invited to visit Pelican's Nest. For two weeks out of each month, the science lab is restricted to the five- and six-year-olds who attend school at the Fairhope K-1 Center; the other two weeks are open to students by reservation, as field trips for children through sixth grade. On the field trips, the kids go down to the beach by Fairhope Pier, along with some volunteer parents, to collect specimens from Mobile Bay using seine nets and smaller nets. "Our bay is a nursery ground," says Dindo. On a typical trip, students will bring seaweed, snails, minnows, small crabs, shrimp, and flounder back to the Pelican's Nest to observe the creatures before putting them in one of the lab's two 55-gallon aquaria.

"We have such a diverse ecosystem here in the bay," Dindo explains. "When more students and parents understand what lives there and what affects their well-being, they'll be more protective."

Everything inside Pelican's Nest is designed with kids in

mind, from the lowered countertops to the pint-sized chairs. But it's the technology that impresses the adults who accompany students on field trips. When students come back from their gathering trips to the bay, they can see what they've gathered on a big-screen monitor through a flex cam, which "helps them to discover," says Dindo, who calls herself "a believer in cutting-edge technology as much as possible."

"I'm also a big believer in having enough equipment for



Designed by Fairhope Educational Enrichment Foundation board member and architect Gina Walcott, the Pelican's Nest is a state-of-the-art science lab at the Fairhope K-1 Center.

everyone to use," she says—as she ordered 30 sets of each piece of equipment, from magnifying glasses to microscopes to discovery scopes, so that no one has to wait and share. "Each child manipulates the equipment, learns new vocabulary words, and increases their confidence," she says. "They become experts."

In addition to studying the bay that's in their own backyard, the students are exposed to other aspects of science, including a weather center, a digital camera, and a computer with internet access that allowed them to communicate with two scientists from Dauphin Island Sea Lab when they went on a trip to Antarctica.

Meanwhile, the parents who initiated FEEF are thrilled with the results they've seen at the Pelican's Nest. "Our mission is to give [the students] something more than the curriculum defined by the state," says board member Kathy Davis. In addition to the science lab, "something more" includes an annual grants program for teachers that distributed \$30,000 in the last school year for Fairhope teachers to use as seed money for their own projects. In their discussions with principals, FEEF board members have realized that teacher education is one of the areas in which extra funds are much needed.

Next on the agenda is a student grant program open to the 3,000 students in Fairhope schools—a great way, says McBrearty, to "involve students in the process of thinking about the foundation." Currently, FEEF holds two major events each year—a golf tournament and the Bay Masquerade, a costume dance set for October 9—to fund its projects. In the coming months, FEEF plans to build its endowment from its current \$115,000 to \$1 million, so that the interest will be a perpetual funding source, say McBrearty and Davis.

For more information, call the FEEF office at 990-3333 or the Pelican's Nest at 990-2230. ■

—Michelle Roberts