



**PARK PICKS**  
by  
**FRIENDS OF THE ALLENTOWN PARKS**



**Friends Introduces New Program**

**“Get Back to Nature!”**



Since 2008 Friends of the Allentown Parks has worked to increase support for Allentown’s public parks through fundraising, volunteer recruitment and community education. While we have accomplished much, we recognize a need to do more vis-à-vis education.

During the Pokemon Go! craze people of all ages were in the parks - walking, talking and enjoying the great outdoors, but often without recognizing their natural surroundings. For recreational activities we have Cedar Beach - basketball or volleyball, handball at Jordan Park and any number of ballfields and playgrounds throughout the city. Interested in fishing? Many of our parks have waterways and the Li’l-Le-Hi Trout Nursery stocks many of them with locally raised trout. Yet with all these recreational opportunities, children don’t necessarily relate to the park setting.



beneficial impact of, for example, park trees (shade, air purification) is overlooked.



Since that time and in recognition that the future caretakers of our parks don’t yet fully appreciate the environmental/ecological importance of parks to their quality of life, Friends has collaborated with Environmental Urban Studies students at Muhlenberg College, students in Lehigh University’s Iacocca Global Entrepreneurship Intensive program and former Mosser Elementary School teacher Peggy Egolf to develop a hands-on environmental education program for elementary students.

The Friends program - **“Get Back to Nature!”** - brings the outdoors into the classroom, supplements the science curriculum and provides learning sessions on birds/bird conservation, bats/bat conservation, water pollution/water conservation, insects and trees – all issues with which Friends has been quite active. The program pilot dealt with trees and was held on Arbor Day 2018 with Sheridan Elementary School third graders. With assistance and support from the Allentown Dept of Parks and Recreation, children learned about various types of trees, their benefits to wildlife and humans, and concluded with learning proper planting techniques by potting 250 seedlings. (A total of 350 seedlings were thereafter planted in several Allentown parks.) The hands-on learning activity provided students the opportunity to concentrate on “the tree” – looking at its leaves, structure, root system, etc. (And of course, getting hands dirty with potting soil made for even more fun.)



Several years ago in autumn, a group of cub scouts visited the Friends office for a learning session on trees and birds. After the session, everyone went outside into the park. One scout walked to the stream, saw a female Mallard with several ducklings and had an “aha” experience when he proclaimed, in a rather pensive tone – “You know, there’s more to a park than a playground. There are trees, and water, and ducks.”

Two days later, a middle school science teacher lamented that her students had little interest in learning about the environment. With several parks and a public swimming pool nearby, she decided to conduct a survey and asked students what activities they undertook when they visited a park. The results: 35% played sports, 26% used playgrounds, 12% hiked trails, 11% picnicked, 7% went swimming, 6% had quiet time and 3% went fishing. The overwhelming majority of time was spent in recreational activities. While recreation is indeed important for many reasons (health, fitness, overall well-being), the surrounding environment is taken for granted and the



The **“Get Back to Nature!”** program continues at Sheridan Elementary School during the upcoming schoolyear with introduction of the other learning sessions... and of course...trees. The goals of this program are to:

- actively engage children and increase their interest in science and the environment;
- utilize this project experience to engage others in support of environmental initiatives, in particular, those related to maintaining Allentown’s beautiful parks; and
- use the skillsets derived from the overall experience in their personal development.

After all, these children ARE the future caretakers of our parks and a little boost of knowledge now will hopefully have a memorable and lasting impact.



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