

Annual \$10,000 “Beyond The Box” Prize Goes For Project Mixing Horticulture With Helping Kids With Special Emotional Needs

By Steve Robinson for the Normalite, September 22, 2011

High school students who have emotional disturbances face a 1-out-of-2 risk of not finishing to the 12th grade to get their diploma. Without that diploma, finding work and thus, contributing to society, could be difficult.

But three teachers at Normal Community High School who specialize in dealing with students who have emotional and behavioral disorders believe they have hit upon a plan to help their students to learn a skill while, at the same time, aid the school to earn a little extra income down the road.

NCHS Student Support Staff members Hilary Ruyle, Carrie Leonard, and Molly Stolfa, joined by Unit 5 Horticulture teacher Dr. Kevin Enderlin, have won the second annual \$10,000 “Beyond The Box” Grant, sponsored by the Beyond The Books Educational Foundation. The grant project is a joint venture between NCHS’ Special Education and Agriculture departments.

In the project, titled “Horticulture Therapy,” teachers will use the greenhouse behind the high school as their classroom for these students, operating it as a business. The students involved in the project will own an equal share of the business.

Among the skills the students will learn as part of the project are:

Landscape design and installation: Students will design and install landscape around the outside of the greenhouse.

Managing of public relations for the project, including activities which will draw parent, staff, and community support for the project.

Teachers involved in the project will coordinate with Master Gardeners, local nurseries, and local companies as guest speakers and expert resources. This aspect of the project would include field trips to horticulture-related businesses in the community.

Students will begin planting and transplanting vegetable and flower bedding plants in the greenhouse. They will care for the plants until May. By May, the students will offer the plants for sale to parents, staff, and the community-at-large. Any flowers not sold will be planted by the students into a school landscape.

Students in this project will plant tomato and pepper plants from seeds at the start of the spring semester, Enderlin said.

Three students involved in the project are Tyler Teste, 16, a sophomore; Michael Jackson, 15, a sophomore; and Jacob Rodgers, 14, a freshman. Jackson said he knew there was a similar program for horticulture at Normal Community West High, the school he transferred to NCHS from.

“I think the whole aspect of what the teachers put together had aspects we had seen before, but with agriculture being the subject, everybody is trying to go green,” said Gail Ann Briggs, a member of the Beyond The Books Foundation Board and a Unit 5 School Board member.

“It was a highly ranked project for us,” Briggs said about the Beyond The Books grant committee in their deliberations over which project should get the \$10,000 grant. “It’s for a population that needs more of their needs met.”

“The way Dr. Enderlin had collaborated and cooperated with other agencies to secure funding from other groups” showed the committee awarding the grant promise that the project would be a project that would see continued use and growth into the future, Briggs explained. For Briggs, that was one of the selling points of the project.

“I look at staying power,” Briggs said about one of the criteria that helped her decide to award the grant to this project. She added this project has a lot of substance and equipment needed for growing plants. She said students would learn the business aspect of this activity, giving them a chance to earn income for the school from the products they sold.

“I’m really pleased that the NCHS Ag department will be a working facility,” Briggs said. “This project is just really outstanding