

The Capital

Around Crofton: 'Operation Eco-Lunch' helps Crofton Middle School go green

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Crofton Middle School student Sarah Sykora is not the type to sit idly by when she sees a problem. She's the type to do something about it. So, when the 12-year-old became concerned by the amount of waste generated at her school, she devised a plan to reduce lunchroom trash and implement a lunchroom recycling program.

Sarah, a member of Girl Scout Cadette Troop 1632, took on the project - which she christened "Operation Eco-Lunch" - to earn her Girl Scout Silver Award. To secure funding, Sarah applied last fall for a \$500 grant from Do Something, Inc., a New York-based nonprofit dedicated to increasing volunteerism and community action among teenagers. "I never thought I would get (the grant) but I did," Sarah said. In January, she attended a "Social Action Boot Camp" workshop hosted by the charity at Georgetown University, in which she learned tips and strategies for implementing change.

Sarah kicked off Operation Eco-Lunch this spring with a school-wide poster contest aimed at promoting the upcoming trash-reduction program. "Sarah really motivated the kids in the building. She got the awareness piece going," said Crofton Middle Principal Sharon Hansen. "Kids were making posters and saying, 'Yes, we can do this!'"

Through talking with the school's custodians, Sarah learned that an average of 24 bags of lunchroom trash was generated each day. Sarah set a goal of reducing lunchroom waste by 25 percent. What began as a one-week trash-reduction contest among students from four different lunch periods, ended up being extended to a month-long competition.

Sarah used a portion of grant funds to purchase items for weekly prize drawings for students in the winning lunch periods. Among the prizes were "Laptop Lunch" boxes (www.laptoplunches.com), reusable lunch boxes featuring multiple food compartments. (Sarah is a fan: "All the trash I have at the end of lunch is an empty milk carton," she said.)

Through recycling efforts and more "eco-conscious" lunch-packing, all four lunch period groups exceeded the 25 percent trash-reduction goal, achieving a 40 percent overall reduction in lunchroom waste. Along with a well-earned sense of satisfaction, Sarah also gained through her project appreciation of the challenges faced daily by middle school teachers: "The kids did a great job reducing trash...but they didn't behave well when I gave out prizes," she noted.

For support during the course of her project, Sarah collaborated with Crofton Middle's Green School committee, a group of half a dozen faculty members charged with leading the school's effort to earn a Maryland Green School designation from the Maryland Association for Environmental and Outdoor Education (www.maeoe.org).

Committee member Steve Onken praised Sarah's work spearheading the waste-reduction campaign. "Sarah has a powerful vision for seeing a reduction in waste and an increase in recycling at Crofton Middle School and beyond," he said. "In working with the faculty...Sarah demonstrated remarkable patience, respect, and strong leadership skills."

Sarah's mom and Girl Scout troop leader, Martha Sykora, said, "I am really proud of all the girls in our troop who have completed or are still working on their Silver Awards. Sarah's project was fairly ambitious but she was quite determined to carry it out. Her dad and I are especially proud of how she adapted her plan when necessary and saw it through to a successful conclusion."

Energized by the success of the lunchroom waste-reduction project, Sarah, who just completed seventh grade, is already looking ahead to helping her school make further progress this fall. She's enlisted the support of the school's PTO to help her use remaining grant funds to implement a classroom recycling program. She also plans to form a student Green Club whose members will be responsible for collecting the recyclable waste from each classroom.

In the meantime, Sarah encouraged her peers to visit the www.DoSomething.org Web site. "It has some really interesting stuff," she said. "Maybe you will get ideas for a project of your own."

The Crofton Branch Library at 1681 Riedel Road will host free 45-minute performances of "Rumpelstiltskin" by Stevens Puppets on June 25 at 1:30 p.m., 3:30 p.m. and 7 p.m. For information call 410-222-7915.

Homestead Gardens at 743 W. Central Ave. in Davidsonville will host the introduction of M.E. Warren Flower Portraits at its Crape Myrtle Festival Ladies Night from 8 to 10 p.m. July 17. For information, call Joanie Surette at 410-991-0264.