

Minnesota Youths become “Eco-preneurs” with Putting Green

Laurel Gamm, a busy mom and physician from New Ulm, Minn., had no plans to start a mini-golf business. But on the way home from a family vacation, she had an “A-ha” moment.

After some good family fun at a mini-golf course, Gamm’s 8-year-old son designed his own course on paper. Feeding off of her son’s enthusiasm and the positive family energy, Gamm was inspired.

“Wouldn't designing and developing a mini golf course be a great hands-on way to learn many disciplines -- physics, math, art and business?” she recalled thinking at the time.

With her passion for education and a new found interest in sustainability -- what's good for the environment and good for business can be one in the same -- sustainability education became a natural theme for the park.

Gamm envisioned a mini-golf park designed and operated by young people, just like her son whose mini-golf sketches got the ball rolling.

Her vision became a reality in 2001, when Putting Green, Inc., was formed as a nonprofit organization. Thanks to its many supporters and volunteers, Putting Green is an innovative mini-golf park for environmental education serving south central Minnesota.

“We’ve centered this project around the concept of sustainability and new environmentalism, which includes preservation of natural resources as well as innovation,” she said. “It really transforms the way we do business, and we’re trying to put our young leaders on the cutting edge.”

A Green Adventure on the Greens

Located on the Minnesota River, Putting Green is in a serene setting, perfect for family fun. The goal of the greens is to educate both its visitors and the young people behind the design and operation of the park.

On the first hole, putters are encouraged to begin thinking about environmental topics.

“Begin your journey as a grain of sand, washed from under the grinding glacier,” reads the sign at Hole 1. “Then join the flow and follow the recipe for Earth’s best soil.”

The 9-hole course is designed to teach visitors about regional environmental conditions and hazards. Signs tell about the development of local soils and proper treatment of water to perpetuate healthy watersheds.

Hole 2 reads: “Rain falls across the state, and sooner or later, all surface water flows into one of the main watersheds. Like a drop of rain, your golf ball will roll to the nearest watershed.”

Not only do course signs share environmental information – on everything from fertilizer runoff to making ethanol from corn -- but the course itself is designed to have less impact on the environment. Park designers – students and adults together – use recycled and resource-efficient materials wherever possible. Even concession foods are based on sustainable choices.

Three and a half acres of Putting Green is planted in native trees, shrubs, grasses and flowers. All of the landscaping elements of the park will be displayed as educational exhibits.

The other six acres of the park make up the natural river ecosystem. Though this riverside area will not be landscaped, it will be made more accessible to people through improvements made to the interpretive river trail, including a pier, monitoring station and picnic area.

In 2004 a solar building was donated by a student board member and his family. A New Ulm High School shop class remodeled parts of the building to use as a clubhouse, with a concession stand and ticket booth.

As Hole 7 illustrates using two footprints labeled Population and Consumption: “Our Earth is only so big, with only so much to give. Too many people consuming too many resources can leave our planet struggling to survive. Aim for a healthy Earth by maintaining the right balance between how many of us there are and how much we consume.”

Putting Green’s environmental work has not gone unnoticed. Young Putting Green team members received an award from the Minnesota Association of Resource Conservation and Development Councils for monitoring water quality of the Minnesota River at the park site.

Young Entrepreneurs Mix Good Business with Sustainability

One of Putting Green's main goals is “to inspire and train our young people to be the leaders of tomorrow by giving them the opportunity to discover, create and innovate, and be the next, better stewards of our natural resources.”

With the help of educators, science experts and design professionals, youth and adults have been working together in workshops and in classrooms to design various elements of Putting Green, including the miniature golf learning stations, the learning center building, landscaping, interpretive signage, the park website, a business plan and artwork.

Gamm has high hopes for young people in her area, and she wants her park to be a catalyst for their future success. From design to implementation and operation of Putting Green, kids have been involved in every aspect of the park. Gamm’s experiential focus is on young people ages 12 to 20.

“The whole park was designed by kids,” she said. “They are at the heart of it.”

Starting in the winter of 2001, a group of young people partnered with adults to build a business plan for Putting Green. During this 6-month process, area teens and business leaders penned the 100-page document that still guides them today.

In 2005, Putting Green partnered with South Central College to offer a multi-generational college credit course to high school students and area small business owners. Using the park as a case study, the students learned key aspects of business development and operation. They wrote a business plan to purchase the Dome, a geodesic structure used for workshops and events.

“Beyond that class, we still needed to develop a core of young people to take ownership of the park,” Gamm added.

She then developed another partnership with the Cloud Institute for Sustainability Education, in New York City. The Institute was created in response to the growing need for educational materials and professional development focused on sustainability. The mission of the Cloud Institute is to ensure the viability of sustainable communities by leveraging changes in K-12 school systems to prepare young people for the shift toward a sustainable future.

Gamm modified the Institute’s curriculum to offer hands-on experiences for her Putting Green kids, terming her new venture the Eco-preneur Program.

The course is called *Business and Entrepreneurship Education for the 21st Century*, teaching triple bottom line practices. Triple bottom line measures the performance of businesses based on three broad sets of criteria: financial performance, social contributions and environmental impact.

High school students were given the background knowledge to understand not only how businesses perform financially, but also how they play a role in shaping, and are shaped by, society and the environment. They are challenged to think about how to measure the three outcomes, and how we make decisions based on them. Finally, they have opportunities to apply new knowledge and skills in real situations by being part of a committed team of Putting Green Park “owners.”

In January 2006, Gamm offered a night class using the Cloud Institute curriculum for 12 high school students. Students were given a stipend to take the course, since Gamm couldn't offer school credits. After the course, all but one student went on to work at the park.

"Using the stipend was a good choice," Gamm said. "It got kids thinking about the working world and getting paid for doing work."

The Putting Green team's green business practices won them an award from the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation for their work in youth entrepreneurship.

Putting Green Youths Speak Out

Young people from age 12 to 20 have worked on nearly all aspects of park design, implementation, maintenance and operation. Artistic kids have helped do marketing and graphic design work, computer savvy children are using data programs to document park usage and young people staff, maintain and clean Putting Green.

"Now that I work at Putting Green," said Gracie Cimino, age 16, "I have learned that a business is a lot more complex than I thought it was. Everyone has to do their part to make it thrive."

New to the area, Cimino said that she's proud to be a part of a business that values the environment.

Seventeen-year-old Brock Burgau, also of New Ulm, completed the Eco-preneurs class and works at the park 10 hours a week. Along with learning about protecting the environment, Burgau said he's picked up business skills.

"I have learned a great deal of things for the future, including independent problem solving, how to treat customers in a way to make their experience better and everyday lessons about trusting and counting on people."

Gamm said students have thrived and grown through their work with Putting Green.

"One 8th grader on our team was an extraordinary engineer and entrepreneur," Gamm said. "After participating in several Putting Green projects, he went off to Milwaukee and opened his own custom motorcycle business. I think the park gave him an opportunity to stretch his wings and be creative."

A classroom of 6th graders worked on designing one of the mini-golf holes at Putting Green. Gamm approached the Science Museum of Minnesota about their project, and the Museum was so inspired by the student designs that they collaborated with Putting Green on a mini-golf project at the museum.

"These kids are learning what they dream of can become tangible. I have been so impressed with these young people's abilities," Gamm said. "I just wish that we had more resources to support them. We need more of a good cushion of human and financial resources."

Putting Green has been backed by a long list of contributors, grants and local business support, including several Minnesota state agencies, 3M, Monsanto, the Isaac Walton League and the Beim Foundation.

The organization's high goals require more staff and more money. The park is still a success, considering it was designed by and now primarily operated by people ages 12 to 20. And it's difficult to put a price on all the learning that's taken place.

As Burgau said, "I feel that Putting Green is making its mark on every person that comes to the park. Many people say the ideas are great and they will definitely be back. This makes me feel like we have a really good thing going."

For more information on ...

... the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, go to www.ruraleship.org

... Putting Green, Inc., go to www.puttinggreen.org

... the Cloud Institute for Sustainability Education, go to www.sustainabilityed.org

-by Lisa Bauer, 08/06