

School 9 courtyard is built as place for reflection

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Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

The Peace Garden was the girls’ idea.

On Monday afternoon, MLK School 9’s Sisters II Sisters Group for Girls unveiled their project. The unveiling was the culmination of a semester’s worth of work done by the girls and their mentors to both beautify the school’s courtyard and to give students a place for reflection and peace.

The morning of the unveiling, Rochester and the surrounding area were rocked by thunderstorms that ultimately caused significant damage and power outages; leaving teachers and students concerned that the event would be washed out. But, as 1 p.m. approached, the sun emerged — if only briefly — to provide light and warmth; shining on the gathered students and staff as they memorialized a student.

School 9’s new Peace Garden was created by Sisters II Sisters Group for Girls, a social, emotional-based program for sixth-grade girls at the school that teaches them how to code, while also encouraging and cultivating their leadership skills. Sisters II Sisters’ program coordinator is Demitria Lawton-Greggs.

The unveiling began with Sisters II Sisters students and mentors reciting their code, led by Lawton-Greggs.

“We learn by the code,” they said. “We help to create history by learning to code. We help to build the next wave of technology. We are not only becoming empowered women, but we are empowering every girl and woman who hears of our technical powers. We are advocates, leaders and role models. We move with grace and positivity. This is our code.”

A place for peace

“Each year, Sisters II Sisters takes on a project based on what the ladies are interested in,” Jamie Hearn, a social worker at the school and Sisters

the grant, in the grant proposal, they had said they also wanted to remember students and staff who passed away and then not a month and a half later...” Grieving, the Sisters II Sisters girls and their mentors worked diligently on creating and constructing the Peace Garden. They wanted to honor and memorialize Trameek. The community stepped in to help, too.

In addition to their greenery work, Broccolo also helped financially by committing to match every donation made to the garden, including the Gandhi Institute’s grant. Steel Tech Fabricators, based in Rochester, provided tools and gloves for the garden and built and donated a bench in Trameek’s memory which was unveiled at the ceremony.

The unveiling culminated in a ribbon cutting, led by Genesis Gaston-Lopez, Tamajaha Leaner and Lovely Calderon, three 6th grade students and members of Sisters II Sisters. The three girls were the in-person leads for the project.

For the duration of the spring semester, students who elected to return to inperson instruction were on a hybrid schedule, which meant that they were only physically in school on certain days. Still, with the help of their mentors, Broccolo and Steel Tech, all while still managing their classes, the girls managed to create the peace garden — a memorial to their friend and something students and staff will cherish for years to come.

“(Trameek) was a king in his own right,” Jeronda Griffin, a 6th grade teacher and Sisters II Sisters mentor, said at the event. “Beautiful student, intelligent. Unfortunately he won’t be here with us, but his legacy will live on with us forever ... We have a memorial so we can always remember Trameek McGruder, who has touched our lives and our hearts in so many different ways.”

Trameek’s family was present at the event. For the duration of the ceremony, they sat on the bench. After speaking, Griffin presented the family with a bouquet of flowers, including some that were purple —

II Sisters social-emotional support said during the ceremony. “Several of our ladies this year decided to pursue the Gandhi Institute of Rochester’s Youth Healing Hate Grant... our ladies, both virtual and in-person decided to rejuvenate the courtyard and ... create an outdoor learning environment, a place where they could mediate any existing issues and a place where they could practice being calm and use cognitive coping skills.”

The girls, ages 11 and 12, worked together and wrote and applied for the grant. They were successful and received the full amount, \$1000, which they used towards what the Gandhi Institute’s website describes as a project that “provide(s) a creative solution to fear, hostility, and division within their community.”

The peace garden is in the middle of the school, easily accessible by all. The space has grass and trees, seating areas and a stage area. The students, working with Broccolo Tree & Lawn Care, designed the garden and planted flowers, seeds and greenery to beautify the space. Broccolo’s owner, Laurie Broccolo, helped the girls with horticulture education in addition to helping with the design.

The garden is also adorned with stones, painted by those who worked on the project. In the coming year, they hope that all students and staff will have a painted stone in the garden.

As the weather permits, the Peace Garden can and will be used as an outdoor classroom. Other uses for the garden include mediation for interpersonal disputes — the girls even had a mediation kit at the ceremony — and contemplation. The girls explicitly want the space to be a place in which students and staff alike can focus on peace, serenity and both their mental and physical health.

In the original grant, the girls included language about how the peace garden would give students a place to remember students and staff who passed away. Then, in late March, as students were returning to in-person classes for RCSD’s hybrid model, a beloved student suddenly and unexpectedly died and students and staff alike were given a tragic reason to grieve.

Remembering Trameek

both to affirm Trameek’s school royalty and because purple was his favorite color.

Trameek’s bench is made of steel. It’s powder-coated black to prevent rusting and large enough that it easily sat his family. A placard on it reads, “Your life was a gift, your memory a treasure. You are loved beyond words and missed beyond measure. In loving memory of Trameek McGruder.” The placard features two bowties, in memory of the boy who wore one everyday.

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Sisters II Sisters staff and students gather for a photo in front of the Peace Garden. The girls had the idea for the garden, wrote the grant and were hands-on with the construction of it. The women are the girls’ Sisters II Sisters mentors. Top, left to right: Tamajaha Leaner; Lovely Calderon; Genesis Gaston-Lopez Bottom, left to right: Anna Madrid, 6th grade teacher; Jeronda Griffin, 6th grade teacher; Jamie Hearn, School 9 Social Worker. PHOTOS BY ADRIA R. WALKER/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

Trameek McGruder, 9, was described as “one of the nicest little boys” by a secretary at School 9. Teachers’ eyes welled up with tears as they talked about the third grader who was known for wearing bowties to school everyday. He was to be the school’s president.

The unthinkable happened.

In late March, Trameek died in a freak accident.

“All the teachers that worked with him wanted to come down for the dedication,” Hearn said. The unveiling of the Peace Garden was streamed so that students, staff, teachers and people at home were able to watch and remember the student they all loved.

“It’s rough for students and staff. Being remote and then getting ready to come back and then this... there’s just no words,” Hearn said. “When the girls put together



Genesis Gaston-Lopez, 12, one of the Sisters II Sisters students who spearheaded the peace garden, holds the mediation kit.