



Helping People...

...Help the Land.



United States
Department of
Agriculture



Volunteer Brings Habitat and Architectural Beauty to the Fairgrounds



Monarch caterpillar found at the base of the new pollinator habitat

On a recent visit to the Bartholomew County Fairgrounds, Heather Shireman found an exciting scene — about 10 monarch caterpillars eating all the milkweed that had been planted around the base of the new pollinator habitat.

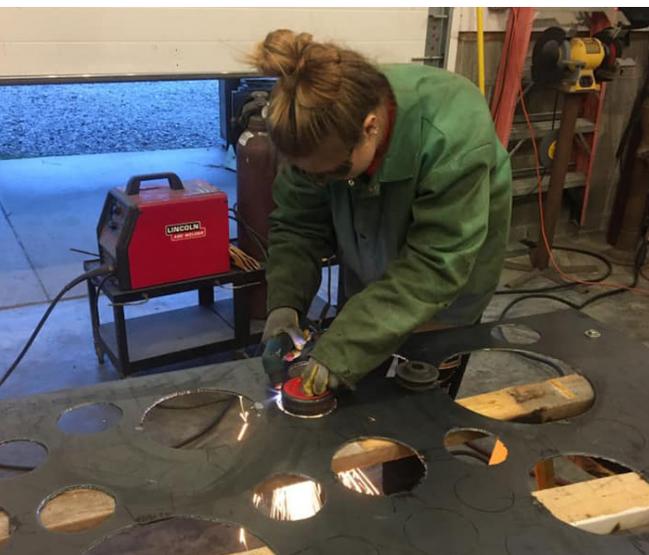
For Shireman, who is the district coordinator for Bartholomew County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), the presence of the caterpillars was proof that the recently installed habitat structure was serving its purpose and bringing pollinators to the area.

The metal and wood structure was built in the spring as a senior project by Allana Whiteside, who is now a freshman at Purdue University. Along with plants for caterpillars to feast upon around the base, the main habitat structure also has space for moths, butterflies, ladybugs and bees to escape from the elements and lay eggs. It was placed at the fairgrounds in Columbus, Indiana as part of their existing Conservation Corridor, which was built through a partnership between the SWCD and USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

The corridor has been in place for about five years and is a small-scale version of the Pathway to Water Quality exhibit located at the State Fairgrounds. The corridor includes pollinator plants, prairie grasses, an education area and more. The purpose, Shireman said, is to educate the public about conservation and things they can do at home to protect the environment.

Whiteside had been involved in the corridor from the beginning as an Earth Team volunteer and returned each summer to weed the area, rake leaves and help in any way she was needed. So, when it came time to complete a senior project as part of her high school graduation requirements, she decided adding to the corridor would enable her to have a positive impact while learning new skills.

"I've kind of been interested in conservation all of my life," Whiteside said.



Whiteside uses skills she learned from her father to create her pollinator habitat structure.



“I’ve always been in 4-H, so I’ve done projects regarding the conservation of the earth and stuff like that through 4-H. So, then I was like, ‘Oh, this is kind of perfect. I already know a little bit about it.’”

The senior projects require students to learn new skills while serving their community. For some of her classmates, that meant learning about event organization while putting together a fun run, she said. As part of her pollinator habitat, Whiteside set out to learn metal working skills such as welding and using a plasma cutter. The skills were a key aspect of the project because the main structure where the different habitats are located is made of metal to fit in with the modern architecture located throughout Columbus.

“My dad actually knows how to weld so he helped me with that part,” Whiteside said. “He taught me how to weld before I did my project. So, I spent a lot of time with him out in the shop before starting my project. I just wanted to make it look nice so it could fit in with Columbus because everything is so architecturally structured.”

The new habitat — which has different living areas such as boxes for butterflies, pine cones for ladybugs and wooden burrow holes for solitary bees — has a dual purpose of protecting the pollinators and serving as an educational resource.

Shireman said they were able to hold a pollinator habitat workshop at the corridor in September and use Whiteside’s habitat to talk about ways people can protect pollinators in their backyard. There are also plans to add signs detailing how

the structure works and the benefits of providing habitats for pollinators and insects, even if it is something as simple as a pile of sticks in the backyard.

“When Allana came to us and said, ‘Hey, I want to put this here,’ we thought that’d be a great idea because we’re really trying to build a pollinator habitat,” Shireman said. “We have all the flowers. We have a bunch of things like that, but we really didn’t have homes for them.”

The presence of the caterpillars shows that the new structure is already working.

The total project took about 80 hours to complete, Whiteside said. At the beginning of the project, she had promised the SWCD Board, who not only approved her constructing it at the corridor but also gave her grant money to help, that she would finish it. So, she decided to forge ahead and complete it even after the senior project requirement was canceled for her class due to COVID-19.

“It really makes me like feel accomplished and just happy that my work is actually going to be used for quite some time,” Whiteside said. “Every summer I’m going to plant new plants, so that they can be there through the months of July through November.”

To learn more about the Bartholomew County Conservation Corridor, visit: <http://www.bartholomewswcd.org/pathway-project/>. To learn more about the Earth Team Volunteer program and how you can serve as a volunteer, visit: www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/in/people/volunteers/.