

EXPLAINING

Teaching new perspectives through the Fairchild Challenge

by David Whitman

We were able to exercise the creative sides of our minds while mixing it with facts.

—Alejandro Gonzalez & Dawn McDonald,
Palmetto Middle School students, on the Fairchild Challenge

What I liked about the field trip to Fairchild was that it was fun; the air was free and clear. I felt alive. The garden inspired me in a lot of ways. I also liked that there was a famous painter who showed us her paintings and helped us to paint.

—Tatiana Conta, José Martí Middle School student



CALIFORNIA ARTIST KAREN FREY AT FAIRCHILD TEACHING PERSPECTIVE TO JOSE MARTI MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS LISA RAMIREZ AND DIOSNEIL GONZALEZ.

David Whitman/FTBC

American jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. wrote that a “mind stretched to a new idea never goes back to its original dimensions.” Remember times when new knowledge has caused your mind to expand, your perspectives to shift, your senses to awaken, so that the world suddenly seemed a different place? They are often unexpected, these events that trigger changes in perception, and they can shape us in profound ways.

Childhood is full of such magic, of course. What happens, though, to the childlike qualities of receptive minds and open hearts as we mature? Many people appear to settle into a pattern of comfortable perception, seldom venturing beyond their established boundaries, while others seem to be changing constantly. We admire those whose spirits seem

perpetually youthful, adventurers who retain a curiosity about the world, who welcome paradigm shifts and find joy in unexpected places.

Teenagers straddle these worlds of childhood and adulthood. Adolescence, for all of its tumultuous ups and downs, is generally an exciting time of change, exploration, and energy. Tapping that vast reserve of youthful energy is essential to working successfully with teens, and it can also be extremely rejuvenating to those of us who work with students in that age group.

The Fairchild Challenge is Fairchild’s free, multi-disciplinary outreach program for grades 6 to 12. It weaves science, the arts, language and community involvement into environmental learning through various competitions. The goal, according to the program’s designer, Education Director Caroline Lewis, is to “heighten students’ environmental awareness, scholarship and stewardship.”

Like its adolescent participants, the Fairchild Challenge has experienced impressive growth spurts. Following the pilot program in 2002-03 for high schools alone, the number of participating students has increased nine fold, to 12,500 in 2005, and is expected to exceed 16,000 this year.

The 2005-06 program offers 25 Challenge options aligned with Sunshine State Standards; 11 for middle schools, 14 for high schools. Public and private schools throughout the region compete for points by submitting entries for judging at Fairchild by panels of experts.

Nancy Wolcott, who has chaired several evaluation panels, summarized her experience:

With great creativity, the Fairchild Challenge tackles the lofty goal of helping young people develop as responsible citizens. It is a model program, and I am privileged to join the many volunteers who take part in it. I learned a lot from the students who participated in the program and, like them, I had a wonderful time in the process.

To receive the Fairchild Challenge Award this year, middle schools must earn 500 points; high schools, 700. Additionally, the five highest schools in both programs each receive cash prizes ranging from \$500 to \$1,000 for their environmental activities.

FAIRCHILD CHALLENGE OPTIONS COMMON TO MIDDLE (MS) AND HIGH SCHOOLS (HS), 2005-06

- Challenge and Baynanza T-shirt designs
- Original songs inspired by nature (MS) or about the Everglades (HS)
- Environmental lifestyle changes with documentation
- Community outreach
- Art of palms: Sculptures and drawings (MS) or sculptures and watercolors (HS)
- School garden or habitat restoration
- Challenge brochure: English and other languages

EXCLUSIVELY FOR MIDDLE SCHOOLS

- Sci-fi writing: "A world without plants"
- Environmental cartoons
- Gas, glass, grass: Research posters
- Green Treasures: Traditional uses of plants

EXCLUSIVELY FOR HIGH SCHOOLS

- Environmental debate competition, Saturday, January 28, 8:30 a.m.–3:30 p.m., Fairchild
- Fairchild research/opinion papers
- Environmental Immersion Day, Tuesday, March 28, 8:30 a.m.–3:30 p.m. various sites
- Photography: Art in nature
- Reduce/Reuse/Recycle skit
- Challenge website design
- Research projects showcase, Tuesday, April 25, 3:30 p.m., Fairchild



"CHILDHOOD ROOTS" BY ALEXIA LOBAINA, MIAMI SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL. FIRST PLACE (TIE), FAIRCHILD CHALLENGE PHOTOJOURNALISM 2005.


Last May, students were asked to list two things they had learned from having participated in the Fairchild Challenge. The following are just two of the many wonderful responses we received.

I learned that the environment is something that can be destroyed and that one person alone can make a difference in changing the way we use/view the environment.

—Miami Killian Senior High student

One thing I learned in the Fairchild Challenge is that you should care about your environment around you. And another thing is to always try your best.

—José Martí Middle School student

Want to help with this year's program? We need volunteers to promote the Fairchild Challenge program at schools and community events, staff events, solicit funding and/or donations and help manage and evaluate the thousands of incoming student entries. "Volunteering at Fairchild is fun and interesting," wrote Dick Bemelmans, a university student from the Netherlands who volunteered with the Fairchild Challenge during his summer vacation in Florida. "And, for the first time, I saw the living source of my only addiction: *Theobroma cacao*, the chocolate tree." 

The picture I selected for the Fairchild Challenge competition is highly representative of the relationship between people and plants in that it demonstrates the bond they share. The child in this picture is symbolic of all mankind because if as children we are taught to embrace nature and treat plants as our brothers and sisters, then throughout our lives we would respect those things found in the natural world and feel a connection towards it based on the roots of love engraved in us during our childhood years. As the child in the picture hugs the tree, it speaks to us that each and every person still holds claims within their hearts of that faded love for nature that was nurtured in our youth. The image beckons us to call out to that forgotten bond and once again seek that spiritual connection that was so much a part of us in our innocence; the connection that binds everything and everyone on this Earth. Nature is a part of everything and as such, we, whether human or plant, are all a part of nature.

—Alexia Lobaina, Miami Senior High School

FOR MORE INFORMATION,

PLEASE SEE OUR WEBSITE, WWW.FAIRCHILDGARDEN.ORG UNDER THE EDUCATION/FAIRCHILD CHALLENGE SECTION.

QUESTIONS?

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