

EXPLAINING

FROM PHOTOSYNTHESIS TO PHOTOJOURNALISM: CREATIVELY REACHING 23,800 STUDENTS A YEAR

by David Whitman

“I’ve come to realize that perhaps our true goal is to inspire awe, to create a sense of wonder and appreciation that will grow into caring,” wrote David Powell in *A Fascination for Fish, Adventures of an Underwater Pioneer*. It is a noble goal, and one that Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden also strives to achieve through the fascinating world of plants.

Educators at Fairchild use creative approaches to motivate students to care more about plants and the environment. Nearly all the students involved in Fairchild’s programs report that they have become more environmentally aware, and many search for ways to better their world—often starting at home or in their neighborhoods or schools.

Students in Fairchild’s education programs mirror South Florida’s striking diversity. Fairchild is committed to seeing that schools from all reaches of Miami-Dade County are actively involved in its programs, especially under-resourced schools. Last year, as Fairchild’s Education Department celebrated 25 years of offering school programs, a record 23,800 students participated in grades K-12.

Effectively engaging teenagers in environmental learning requires dynamic, innovative programs. The Fairchild Challenge—Fairchild’s competitive, multidisciplinary, outreach program for middle and high schools—appeals to students of diverse interests, abilities, talents and backgrounds. More than 12,500 teens, representing 63 schools, competed last year in subjects ranging from photosynthesis to environmental photojournalism.

As one of the annual Fairchild Challenge options, participants document how they have changed their environmental behavior and inspired their relatives and friends to follow their example. Vladimyr Domond, a student at Thomas Jefferson Middle School in North Miami, explained why, and how, he changed his behavior:

Every day I used to throw some type of garbage across the street, and the place the wind took my garbage was right in front of the house where no one lived for three long years. When my friends saw me do this, they thought it was OK, so they did the same. Every single day I say I am going to change, but I end up doing the same thing again.

The way my mistake was creating problems on my block was by making it smell bad at the house where no one lived. I always wanted a pretty girl to live there. I remember when the kids on the other block would come on my block and talk trash about how dirty my block was. I knew I had to make a good move fast.

With the decision to change his attitude, Vladimyr developed a clean-up plan, purchased supplies and coaxed his friends to work with him for a day cleaning up his block

of Northeast 154 Street, while their neighbors looked on in disbelief and admiration.

My block is now in the number one spot in the world, finally! Now when I have garbage I throw it away in the garbage, not on the street. I feel like when I make a change, my whole block does so. I was very happy...when you change it really helps.

Fairchild recognized Vladimyr’s efforts at his school’s awards ceremony last May, where he received a Fairchild Challenge trophy, a kayaking certificate and a thunderous ovation from the audience.



David Whitman/FIBG

VLADIMYR DOMOND (CENTER) WITH FRIENDS OLIJAH FRAZER AND NIKKO OSBORNE, CLEANING UP THEIR NEIGHBORHOOD AS PART OF THE FAIRCHILD CHALLENGE.

Science teacher Jocelyne Labossiere was elated at the success of Jefferson’s students, who also earned a Fairchild Challenge award for the beautiful butterfly garden they created at their school.

I am so proud of our students and they are also very proud of their work in the Fairchild Challenge. It was an unbelievable learning experience for them. The team effort was incredible! The garden is giving them a sense of ownership in their school as well as a feeling of contributing to its beautification. The students are actually eager to do more work in the garden. I, myself, found the garden a very useful and powerful teaching tool for life science.

Environmentalist David Powell would be happy to know about the students at Thomas Jefferson Middle School and thousands of others like them who—through Fairchild’s education efforts—now care more about our collective and fragile world. 