

## PHOTO GALLERY: A place to learn and play

Indian Brook Elementary remembers lost staff and student with opening of new facilities for play and learning

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**GateHouse News Service**

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PLYMOUTH — Indian Brook Elementary School welcomed students back this year with new playing fields and a new outdoor classroom.

The classroom, which will continue to grow with new learning stations over the years, is dedicated to Nicole Garofalo, the 7-year-old Indian Brook second-grader who died of carbon monoxide poisoning in January 2005 when a blizzard plugged a furnace vent pipe at her home.

Nikki's Place, as the outdoor classroom is still informally known, is a place where students can observe cloud formation, identify birds and butterflies and grow their own vegetables from seed. This week, one teacher will use the outdoor classroom behind the school so orchard workers can show the children how they make cider with an apple press.

The playing fields, also located behind the school, mark the culmination of years of planning and effort and are a testament to the patience of the school's students.

The children attending Indian Brook endured a year of playing on asphalt surfaces while newly planted grass established on the fields during the 2009-2010 school year.

The school also paused to remember two former administrators as they opened the fields for the first time Sept. 7.

Former Principal Jo-Ann Sikorsky, who died last summer, and former guidance counselor Moneen Short, who died just before school opened, were remembered during the dedication ceremonies for their commitment to the school and its students.

Nicole Garofalo's grandparents attended the dedication ceremonies as well. Her parents and siblings have since moved out of state.

Assistant Principal Dan Sylvestre said the school improvements mark years of hard work by many volunteers.

He took on the project after joining the school staff three years ago and, with the help of the school PTA, succeeded in earning community-wide support.

Sylvestre said the Garofalo family had been looking for a way to memorialize their daughter and embraced the outdoor classroom idea.

Nikki has already been remembered on a statewide level through the passage of life-saving legislation. Nicole's Law, passed a year after her death, mandated carbon monoxide detectors in homes across Massachusetts.

The outdoor classroom features a patio with picnic tables where students can work on projects. It also includes several birdhouses and a butterfly garden for nature studies.

Strawberry plants will give students a chance to watch the growth cycle next spring. Individual classes will also be encouraged to grow their own plants in the garden plot.

Nikki's Place also features an archeological pit where teachers can bury artifacts for students to uncover. Weather and observation stations will eventually be augmented to include opportunities for students to study solar and wind energy.

A tree planted last spring in the middle of Nikki's Place will be part of an annual Arbor Day celebration at the school. Students will measure the tree every year and plot its growth.

Twin stone pathways in the garden will also allow students to leave their own mark on the school.

At the end of their elementary school careers, students can write their names on a rock from one pathway and switch it to the other path. "In memory of their time spent here, their impact here," Sylvestre said.

The Garofalo family donated funds raised in memory of their daughter for part of the project. Volunteers came through to provide most of the labor.

Also of note, surveyor Brian Cripps drew the landscaping plans. Bayside Tree and Landscape cut and chipped trees and Emerald Excavating dug up the fields and classroom area. West End Drilling dug the irrigation well. Stateline Irrigation donated irrigation equipment. Professional Irrigation installed the irrigation system. Northside Land Construction hydroplaned the fields. Property Design and Landscape donated the tree and landscaped the outdoor classroom. Pastore Concrete poured the patio. And East Coast Fence provided the fencing.

Sylvestre said the entire project was completed with donations and volunteer labor at about half the cost of the original to fix just the playing fields alone.

He credited the hard work of past and present PTA presidents Karen Daley and Tina Chiruna. PTA member Lynn Richart was especially vital to the project, he said, serving as project manager to enlist and coordinate all the volunteers.

The school is still working on how the classroom will be formally designated Nikki's Place. A bench, meanwhile, has already been donated to the fields in memory of Sikorsky.

"It's bittersweet in that we lost a couple of administrators and a student, but at the same time, it's a time of growth and in some way," Sylvestre said.

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