

School for Blind Children

I N S I G H T S

Children's Garden To Delight The Senses

The word "garden" conjures up many images of greenery, plants and flowers, quiet spaces, trees and bushes. In designing a children's garden to be part of the Early Childhood Center, the concept of "garden" was taken apart and reconstructed to create an outdoor space perfectly attuned to youngsters with disabilities. The garden, to be completed in late 2002 as part of the Bellefield Avenue construction project, will not only provide outdoor play space; it will envelop the senses, stretch the body, tickle the imagination and provide a place in the sun for relaxation and respite. It will also be a major new green space to enhance the Oakland community.

The children's garden measures 90 feet by 120 feet, or roughly the size of three residential lots. It will be about the same size as the existing interior meadow within the School for Blind Children building on the other side of Bellefield Avenue.

Think of the garden as a series of rooms, each with its own purpose. View it like a young child left alone in this open space.

Hear the sounds of a waterfall and enjoy the fragrances of earth, flowers and bushes. Touch the flowers set out in raised planters, just at your level. Wend your way up a little hill and through a maze,

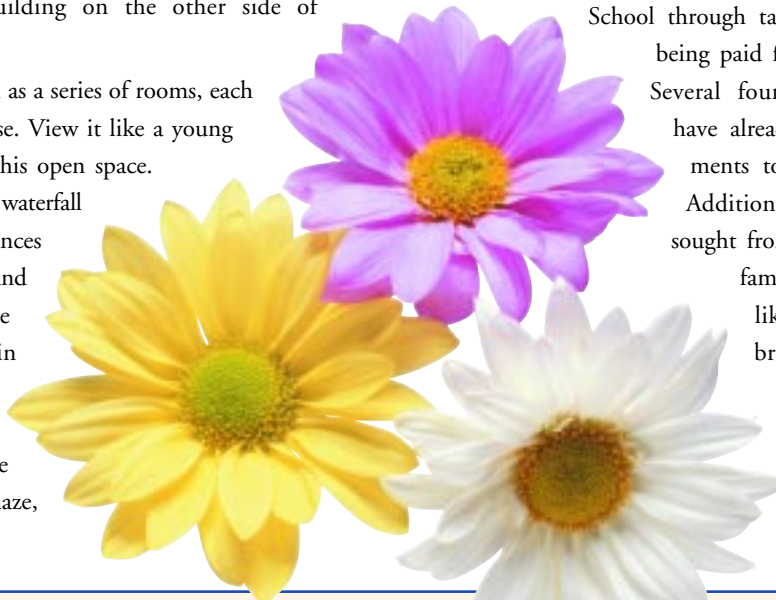
feeling the path below, touching the walls, learning to trust your sense of direction. Step into the shade. Feel the breeze in the tall grasses. Sit down for a snack and raise your face to the sun.

This garden idyll is not an abstract fantasy. It is based on solid research into designed outdoor areas and playgrounds for people with special needs. Says Executive Director Janet Simon, "We explored children's gardens and gardens for the disabled all over the country. We found a talking bench that sings to the child who sits down. In Amsterdam we saw a little play space with a hill. This garden will be almost like an outdoor classroom for nature studies and play. Creative teachers can use it to their maximum."

While the Early Childhood Center is being financed by the School through tax-free bonds, the garden is being paid for by private contributions.

Several foundations and corporations have already made financial commitments to help pay for the project.

Additional contributions are being sought from service clubs, individuals, families and others who would like to purchase paving bricks for the entranceway (see accompanying story, p. 7.)



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Educator Maryjean Lovett

Joins Board of Trustees

Maryjean Lovett, an administrator at the University of Pittsburgh, was elected to the Board of Trustees in December 2001.

Lovett holds an undergraduate degree in speech pathology and audiology from Carlow College. She began her career as a speech therapist with Allegheny Intermediate Unit. Later, she took time off to begin a family and also used her time to get a master's degree in education from the University of Pittsburgh. She is certified in early childhood education.

When her sister opened Pittsburgh Preschool Shadyside, Lovett joined the staff to work in administration. In 1987, when her youngest child entered kindergarten, Lovett took a two-month job on a project at the University of Pittsburgh and never left.

Currently she is Director of Student Alumni Programs at Pitt and adviser to the Blue and Gold Society. The Blue and Gold Society is an organization composed of 32 of the top students leaders who have been chosen to act as liaisons between the student community and the Pitt Alumni Association. The Blue and Gold Society recently was recognized internationally by CASE (Council for Advancement and Support of Education) as the best student organization of its kind.

Lovett's work in education has given her a keen awareness of the School for Blind Children and its role in the Pittsburgh community. She is excited about joining the Board of Trustees, saying, "I have always been interested in helping children and am looking forward to this opportunity. I have known Dr. Janet Simon and admired her work at the School. It will also be a learning experience for me."



Trustee Maryjean Lovett in her office at Pitt.

Before agreeing to join the Board, Lovett toured the School and met with other trustees. "I think the School and its facilities are phenomenal," she says. "I was impressed with the creative process here, the students' art work and the faculty. With plans for the annex, I feel the School is just blooming."

Maryjean and her husband, Bob Lovett, live in Squirrel Hill. They have three children and recently became grandparents. ❄️

Student Art Box Goes to the Olympics

Student Melinda Heibert loves art class, and she loves riding horseback. That combination brought Melinda national recognition in an art contest sponsored by VSA Arts. How did she do it? Melinda received a white cardboard box in her art class one day. She was asked to transform the box to reflect the theme "Inside My Head." She turned the box into a striking image of a horse and its rider.

Now Melinda's box is part of an international exhibit called "Children Beyond Borders" at the 2002 Winter Olympic Games in Salt Lake City, Utah. In December, the box was displayed locally at the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts.

To visualize the box, imagine this dream scape. From the top of a small, white box, an elegant white horse with a feathery mane breaks through a purple field. The image reflects one of 15-year-old Melinda's greatest passions, her equestrian experience in an after school program called Riding for the Handicapped. The imagery of Melinda's artwork was so powerful that her box was selected from among 40 others to represent Pennsylvania in the Olympics exhibit. Melinda has multiple disabilities, including hearing and vision problems. Yet teacher Preston McKenzie says she is a "happy and playful young

lady, who enjoys art and participates with hand-over-hand assistance."

Melinda's artwork represents a strong alliance between the School for Blind Children, the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts and VSA Arts (formerly Very Special Arts). At the nexus of the alliance is Julie Agosti, Special Needs Program Manager for the Center for the Arts. Julie's background is in music therapy, but at the Center for the Arts, she manages an outreach program for special needs students, funded by VSA Arts, foundations and donors.

Agosti passed out 40 boxes to various schools to be decorated last fall. The School for Blind Children received half of them. Says Agosti, "I asked each group of students under the age of 18 with disabilities to

decorate as they wished. There were no detailed instructions, only the theme: How Does Art Make You Feel? I wanted people to be as creative as possible and to use as many types of materials as they could."

At the School for Blind Children, art teacher Carol Kreiser narrowed the theme to "Inside Your Head." Students decorated the outsides of the boxes to represent themselves. In Melinda's case, the box reflected her fringed, curly brown hair. The top of the box was removed so that students could use the space to show something they dreamed about or enjoyed. Says Carol, "Melinda used purple tissue paper, her favorite color. She worked very carefully and used spring scissors to make fringes on the horse. I sent all the boxes to Julie Agosti. Out of all of them, Melinda's box was picked."

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Melinda's prize box shows her love for riding.

www.wpsbc.org

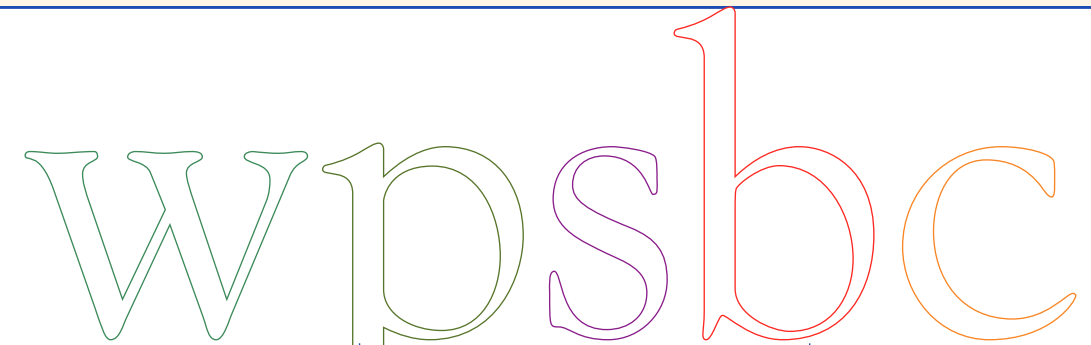
In Living Color, With a Virtual Tour

Avid surfers of the Internet may already have noticed that the School for Blind Children has a new Web site. Others will learn the news here. The address remains the same, but the site has been rethought and redesigned.

The content for the Web site was totally rewritten by *Insights* editor Barbara Paull to be easier to read and less wordy. The content was updated and reorganized to reflect the School's current status as a Blue Ribbon awardee. The new site was designed graphically by Pam Peters of Scott Pipitone Design. Says Peters, "We used bright, cheerful colors and kept the site lively to be a

positive reflection of the School. The type is large so that people with limited vision can see it well, and the navigation is simple and clear."

A technical team from the design firm also worked on the SBC site. The team included Daniel Pipitone, who did the HTML coding; Augie Aggazio, director of technology; and Dan Sparvero, project manager of the software group.



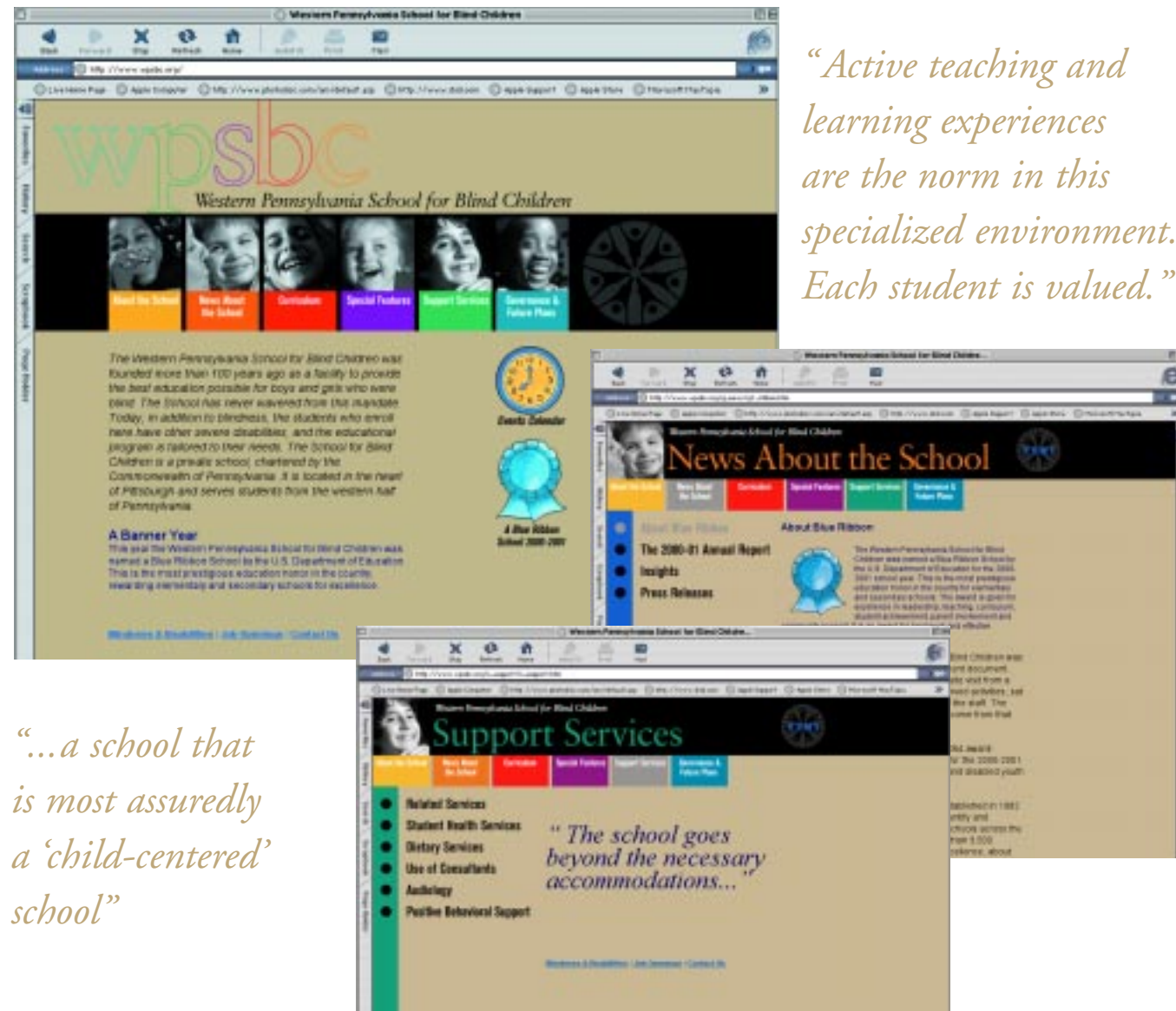
The Web site celebrates the School for Blind Children's status as a Blue Ribbon school. It features a virtual tour, starting with the exterior campus and including a walk through the building, classrooms, special facilities and even a dormitory room. It also highlights comments about the School from outside evaluators and brief segments of the Blue Ribbon report. The Web site should be particularly helpful for parents who are considering enrolling their child at the School. They will learn about the student body, the enrollment process, the composition of faculty and staff, funding, and the nature of the residential program. Other Web headings cover curriculum design, support services and special features offered by the School.

Those who want to learn more about the School on a day-to-day basis can look under the heading of "News About the School" to find current press releases, recent issues of *Insights* and last year's annual report. An events calendar has been added to the Web site. As employment opportunities become available, they will be posted in the Job Openings section.

One advantage of the site created by Scott Pipitone Design is that it can be managed at the School. Technology Specialist Peggy Pegnetter is in charge of updating the Web site regularly.

Right now, Pegnetter is working on an interactive Bulletin Board, geared to parents and their issues. The Bulletin

Board is in response to a survey of parents indicating that they wanted and would use a forum for communication with other parents at the School. The Bulletin Board is still under development, but no doubt each parent will have a password to gain access to the site. It will be interactive, with topics selected by parents. Look for it in the Spring. And if you want to tour the School from the comfort of your home, learn more about our history, or simply gain some knowledge about blindness and braille, log onto our Web site at www.wpsbc.org.



"Active teaching and learning experiences are the norm in this specialized environment... Each student is valued."

"...a school that is most assuredly a 'child-centered' school"

"The school goes beyond the necessary accommodations..."

A Sad Farewell To Trustee Patti Burns

With great sadness, the School for Blind Children learned of the death of Trustee Patti Burns, who had served on the board since 1997. Burns was active in board activities, serving on both the Nominating and Investment committees. A former television personality, she had produced numerous public service TV announcements for the School and served as a spokesperson on schoolwide issues. Within the past year, Burns represented the trustees by helping to write the Blue Ribbon report and visited classrooms to read to our students.

"Patti was a very active and valued trustee," said Executive Director Janet Simon. "The School was fortunate that she contributed her time and her experience to us."





**Children's Garden
Early Childhood Center
Western Pennsylvania School for Blind Children**

Damianos Group
L.D. ASTORINO COMPANIES

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The garden will be gated on three sides, providing a closed, safe environment. Passersby will be able to enjoy the garden visually, but will not have street level entry. The garden is being designed by the two architectural firms involved with the Early Childhood Center: Damianos Group and the L.D. Astorino Companies.

Recently Insights spoke with representatives of the two firms: Marilyn Gelzhiser, project manager, and Syl Damianos. Gelzhiser, a landscape architect with L.D. Astorino, has worked on a wide range of public and private outdoor spaces.

She notes, "This garden is very specialized, but it has the standard elements of any

garden: relaxation and delight to the senses. We want to make it a fun kind of place."

The landscape architects looked at the site as a series of opportunities. They spent time at the School, learning about the needs of the students it will serve, and considering the urban neighborhood as well. Says Gelzhiser, "We wanted the right kind of perimeter treatment. We proposed a combination of iron fence and masonry columns that will allow the garden to be viewed from without. We'll also use vines and interesting bushes."

The garden has been designed so that it unfolds as the visitor moves out from the Early Childhood building through a "grand entrance walk" over brick paving. Moving a bit further, the garden will have a quiet seating area and a play space with play-

ground equipment. A central landscaped area will be inviting for wheelchair users and budding gardeners. It will include raised planters and an accessible plant table, a tactile maze, a fountain or water feature, and other exploratory elements. An active play space will hold a little house to be built by participants in LINK (students from Upper St. Clair High School). At the far end of the site, the terrain becomes more hilly. This natural hill will be an attraction for youngsters who enjoy climbing, rolling down hills and playing in a more challenging terrain. Staff members and others who like to sit outside in good weather will have access to a paved area with tables and chairs.

Gelzhiser is selecting plants, grasses, and bushes based on their sensory qualities.

An Invitation To Pave Your Way Into The Children's Garden

Want to leave your mark on the children's garden?

You can do so by purchasing a paving stone that will become part of the entrance to the garden. An enclosed pathway made up of 900 paving stones, or bricks, will be a permanent feature of the garden.

The pavers can honor or memorialize family, friends or others whose name you would like to see as part of the heritage of the Western Pennsylvania School for Blind Children. Your purchase of a paving stone will also help to complete the creation of the garden itself.

Two sizes of pavers are available. The first, 4" x 8", will cost \$100 and has room for three lines of text at 15 characters each, or a total of 45 characters. When you are counting characters, remember to count each space or punctuation mark, such as a period, as a character.

The larger pavers are 8" x 8", and each paver costs \$200. These pavers have 6 lines with a maximum of 15 characters per line, for a total of 90 characters, including spaces. Names will appear in uppercase and lowercase lettering and will be centered on the line.

Those who would like to order a paving stone through *Insights* can do so by completing the accompanying coupon and returning it to the School. All orders will

be acknowledged within two weeks, so that any necessary corrections can be made.

For people who want to support the work of the School for Blind Children, a paving stone will be a permanent contribution. Bricks can be purchased in honor of birthdays, anniversaries, graduations and births, or to memorialize a relative, friend or respected associate. 🌸



She hopes children will be attracted to the rustling of leaves and pods, the scent of jasmine, herbs and berries, and the textures of ornamental grasses, lamb's ears, burning bush and oriental arborvitae.

The children's garden will be a natural adjunct to the classroom for those in the Early Childhood Center, including pre-schoolers and youngsters who attend the campus daycare facility. And, as Dr. Simon notes, "We will certainly be inviting other children to use the space, too."

Designing a garden for disabled youngsters takes a special kind of thinking. Says Gelzhiser, "It was fun for us, because we are primarily an architectural firm. We had to consider how to address the children's needs, such as motor skill development through physical challenges, or learning to

understand physical relationships. Children require spaces for quiet social play, and the space must be accessible and safe for those in wheelchairs. The garden is a good setting for dramatic play, too."

Architect Syl Damianos feels the project was a learning experience for his firm, too. He says, "It served as an educational element of our architectural practice. All playgrounds must be accessible. That's the way it will be in the future."

This has been an excellent time to build a children's garden. Landscape architects show an intense interest in the design of public spaces for specialized users, and are grappling with issues of how to make gardens accessible, safe and appealing. They have begun to study playground design from the perspective of the users,

and that includes not just children but the adults who accompany them. Urban playgrounds, in particular, are seen as a way for people to reconnect with the natural world and experience growing cycles and seasons. So many specialized gardens, nature trails and therapeutic landscapes have been created that the Internet offers numerous databases and Web pages to learn about the individual sites.

In this context, a children's garden becomes not just a play space, but an opportunity for the development of skills, an oasis for exploration, a time to feel the earth and crush leaves in the palm of the hand, a place to be with others and to feel safe. The children's garden at the School for Blind Children will satisfy those human requirements for many years to come. 🌸



