



For Immediate Release: 10.31.07

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Worms win Keep America Beautiful Innovation Award

A worm composting program at Gwendolyn Brooks Middle School has won a 2007 *Keep America Beautiful Innovation Award* for waste reduction. The vermicomposting program was launched in 2005 through a partnership between the middle school and *Keep Oak Park Beautiful*, an association of local business leaders, school officials, community groups and concerned citizens.

The award will be presented in December during the *Keep America Beautiful 54th* annual national conference in Washington, D.C.

With the help of Brooks Middle School *worm ambassadors*, efforts are underway to expand vermicomposting – a system for turning food waste into potting soil with the help of worms – to Whittier and Mann elementary schools. Students work with Village staff to make sure the worms are “eating right” and teachers include a vermicomposting unit in the science curriculum.

The worm bins and educational materials were purchased with a grant from the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency through *Keep Illinois Beautiful*. Grant funds, along with support from ShirtWorks of Oak Park, also will mean *Worm Ambassadors* T-shirts for the middle school students who are helping launch programs at the elementary schools.

The innovation award is not the first time the *Keep Oak Park Beautiful* vermicomposting program has been recognized. The program earned a *Governor’s Green Youth Award* last year.

“I love working with the schools because of the enthusiasm and willingness of the students,” said Karen Rozmus, the Village’s environmental guru, a former vermicomposter herself, who organized and helped get the program up and running. “After all, they are our future.”

Rozmus credits Brooks’ teacher Gale Liebman for taking the program from idea to reality. Liebman first contacted Rozmus about teaching students the importance of protecting the environment. The conversation grew into a hands-on project – vermicomposting.

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Liebman also was instrumental in promoting the program within District 97 and assisting teachers at other Oak Park schools who are implementing the program in their classrooms, Rozmus said.

Members of the Village's Environmental and Energy Commission supported the project with *Halfway to Earth Day* kick-off events to promote environmental awareness throughout the school year. Earth Day celebrations are planned for April 2008 when the nutrient-rich soil created by the worms – called *castings* – will be used on landscaped areas around the schools.

Keep America Beautiful awards honor innovative partnerships and programs in the areas of litter prevention, waste reduction, beautification and community improvement that support the organization's affiliates and missions.

For more information on the award, or vermicomposting in Oak Park, call 358.5700 or e-mail publicworks@oak-park.us.

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