

## **Re-envisioning Space to Make Room for a School: The Backstory of the John Rex Charter Middle School at Myriad Gardens**

By, Maureen Heffernan

Dr. Pierce told me he needed to find space so that the students graduating from the fifth grade at John Rex Charter Elementary School could continue into grades 6-8 under the John Rex brand. Parents were anxious to keep their children in the school and not have to transfer to a new middle school. Nor did the district have money to build a school or addition. "Maureen", he said, "would you be open to the Gardens hosting a middle school?"

I immediately thought about the chaos of having nearly two hundred students here for nine months and the disruptions to our daily operations...the loss of revenue from private rental spaces... visitors run over by skateboarding pre-teens. I saw gum everywhere.

But then, thank you angels of our better nature.... the vision of having a public school at a botanical garden was just way too wonderful and exciting. We'll clean up the gum somehow. "Yes, let's talk" I said.

I thought about the chance for students to come to school everyday at a botanical garden. I thought about how we could teach them about plants and gardening. I thought about a school where children could look windows and instead of seeing parking lots, they see trees, lush lawns, flowers, a lake with ducks and waterfalls. Wouldn't that be worth doing? Not to mention the free labor to help with our seasonal festival set ups!

An hour later, Dr. Pierce and I were touring the spaces in the lower level of our Visitor Center. The entire area that could work for the school was about 3,500 square feet. While used for occasional meetings and some of our youth and adult education programs, it was primarily used for wedding receptions on weekends.

The fully ADA-accessible space has two large rooms with good natural light, views of the lake and garden, and a catering kitchen. The rooms are connected by a wide long hallway and along the hallways are restrooms, drinking fountains, and storage rooms. If necessary, the space can even function as a tornado shelter. Outside one of the rooms is an outdoor stage set on the lake with amphitheater-seating for 250 people. We soon realized that with minor renovations for security, food service, internet and offices, the adaptive reuse of our existing infrastructure could work surprising well for a school. Especially one that uses a curriculum styled for independent study rather than formal classroom style.

As our staff and board debated losing program and rental space for a school, we kept coming back to the thought that, at this particular time, the highest and best use of our space would be to help the school. We could find the funds to create new education space for our programs.

And brides, well, they have countless venue options, while the school has almost none. The school wins. A lease agreement was formed and we quickly moved forward.

Excited about having a school at a public garden, The Inasmuch Foundation of Oklahoma City, provided a \$700,000 grant to the Gardens and Devon Energy provided a \$1 million gift which enabled us to construct the modifications the school needed, renovate space to create a new upper level classroom for our own education classes and renovate our Visitor Lobby. The school received a one-million-dollar grant for furniture, equipment, and other start-up costs.

It was a win-win-win. A struggling school district saved taxpayers money by not having to build new space; the kids stay with their classmates and attend school at a botanical garden; the Gardens received an infusion of students to share our passion for plants and gardening. Even the rental income loss was not a hardship as the lease covered it along with additional custodial costs.

And gum has not been a problem!

*Maureen Heffernan is the President and CEO of Myriad Botanical Gardens and Scissortail Park.*