

SEPTEMBER 2017 SUSTAINABILITY HERO



SANDY SANDMEYER-BRYAN **Educator and Green Team Coordinator** **Cape May City Elementary School, Cape May County**

Sandy Sandmeyer-Bryan is an educator, mentor and leader in New Jersey's environmental community. She is currently the PACE and literacy teacher, and library manager at her school, as well as coordinator of the Cape May City Elementary School Green Team. She is a member of the Cape May City Municipal Green Team. Sandy received the Outstanding Environmental Educator Formal Sector Award from the Alliance for New Jersey Environmental Education and is a member of the New Jersey Association for Gifted Children. Both Cape May City Elementary School and Cape May City have achieved the silver-level of certification from Sustainable Jersey.

Sandy has made an impact in the school, the community and in the personal lives of Cape May residents. It may have started with a forgotten nature trail in back of the elementary school. Sandy gathered a coalition of the right people to locate, clear and reinstitute the path for the community to use, spearheading a new focus on sustainability and coalition building. In addition to her environmental projects, Sandy has spent 32 years inspiring students. She manages the gifted and talented program and the school library, roles which give her access to every student in the school. Sandy said, "I see a big part of my job as opening up doors for the kids to peak through. I show them the possibilities and provide opportunities, and they take it from there. I see students move from awareness to action all the time and it fuels my energy and gives me hope for a sustainable future."

Sandy founded and leads the elementary school Earth Club which includes students from fourth through sixth grades. The students meet after school and focus on initiatives like the edible garden, habitat restoration, recycling, energy conservation and composting. Sandy has a welcoming way about her that makes you want to be green. She explained, "I try to reach the audience where they are. We make ideas visual and fun and then put systems in place to make action easy for a greater chance of success. We try to live and model new behaviors, rather than preach about them."

Sustainable Jersey for Schools Silver-Certified: Led by Sandy and the green team, the Cape May City Elementary School achieved silver-level Sustainable Jersey for Schools certification with 360 points in 2016. Only thirteen schools in New Jersey have achieved certification at the silver-level.

Cape May Elementary School is unique in that it is the only school in the community and about 70 percent of the school children live at the nearby U.S. Coast Guard Base. The Cape May Elementary School Green Team includes members representing students, parents, teachers, support staff, the community, the Cape May City Education Association, the Board of Education, facilities management and administration. Cape May City Elementary School Principal and Superintendent Victoria Zelenak has been a strong supporter and participant in the sustainability work.



The school completed a range of sustainability actions. A waste audit was conducted and results reported to the principal and school community. Recycling rates were increased throughout the school. The green team helped the Cape May City Board of Education craft and pass the [Sustainability Policy](#). A biodiversity survey was conducted and a revised plan for the school yard habitats was completed. The green team monitored school wildlife areas and maintained a monarch butterfly garden with milkweed and nectar-sources. Stickers were made for the light switches that read, "Be a Hero Energy Saver." You can review the [City of Cape May Elementary School Certification Report](#) to see all of the actions accomplished. Sandy said, "What Sustainable Jersey has done is legitimize, organize and show the importance of sustainability work. We were working in these areas, but by showing the benefits related to budgets and health and providing a structure for it has enabled us to move forward. The program has changed the state of New Jersey."

Turby the Wind Turbine: The Cape May Elementary School has a wind turbine on the school property thanks in part to a collaboration with the municipal Cape May City Green Team. Using a Sustainable Jersey Small Grant, the city's green team purchased a small wind turbine for clean energy and educational purposes. The school celebrated the completed and operational wind turbine with a dedication ceremony. Students shared researched information about wind energy, recited original poems and sang songs. A winner was announced for the name the turbine contest: Turby. Sandy said, "We're proud our school took this step to enable our students and community a first-hand, educational connection with wind as a sustainable energy choice. This project continues to benefit our students and community as we collect data, explore pros and cons of alternative energy sources, study the engineering of turbines, construct turbine models and conduct experiments."



Waste Audit and Improved Recycling: The school green team set a goal to improve recycling, so Sandy applied and received a Sustainable Jersey for Schools Small Grant funded by the New Jersey Education Association to target improvements. The students conducted a school waste audit to determine the baseline for trash versus recycling at the school. Prior to the waste audit, the Earth Club and green team members met to develop the data collection forms. The custodial staff saved and separated the recycling and the trash from the day prior for the waste audit. Announcements were made, volunteers gathered and the Earth Club led the first ever waste audit. Students, parents and staff sorted, weighed and tallied the two days of trash and recycling. The resulting information and goals for improving the recycling rate were written into a report for the principal. The audit helped to kick-start an increased focus on recycling.



Edible School Garden: The school's edible garden was started about 15 years ago by Sandy and the Earth Club. Since then it has developed into a school-wide project, with pre-kindergarten to sixth grade students involved in each aspect, including planning, prepping, planting, tending, harvesting and eating. Sandy said, "A food garden definitely takes a team effort. We're fortunate that the garden has been sustained through the support and collaborative efforts of our students, staff, school board, education foundation, administration, community partners and parent volunteers." The garden has seven raised beds and a portable greenhouse. Most of what they plant is decided by student voting, favorites include: tomatoes, carrots, cucumbers, potatoes and zucchini. A few items such as eggplant, butternut squash and kale became new, top vote-getters after students agreed to "give them a try."



Water Conservation Mural Project: The school green team worked on a collaborative project with Cape May City, the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) and Watershed Ambassador. The City of Cape May created a comfort station with low flow toilets and asked the students to paint a mural to send a message when people enter the comfort station that the community wants to save water. After completing the mural, the students tracked the water savings generated by the restrooms as a part of their environmental and science program.



Education for Sustainability: The school has done an exemplary job incorporating sustainability into the classroom. The school submitted documentation for ten Education for Sustainability (EFS) categories, receiving 100 points in student learning. EFS prepares students for their roles in creating a sustainable future by engaging them in solutions-based design and action that integrates knowledge across different disciplines. For example, the fifth-grade literacy class conducted a research project about renewable energy sources and the sixth-grade health class studied pollution and its impact on personal and community health. The fourth through sixth graders in the Program for Academic and Creative Enrichment (PACE) participated in the 'Voices from the Land' project which asks students to integrate communication and creativity while interacting with nature and using technology. The third-grade class participated in a year-long unit about monarch butterfly migration. Sandy has a hand in many of these projects; she worked with the fourth graders to study New Jersey's State Parks and Forests. While students did research, they learned about natural resources and their importance, man-made and natural threats and managing problems through prevention. Students invited families to visit the "Great Outdoors" in their completed display at the school's Green Scene Festival. Sandy said, "By learning about New Jersey and its wonderful natural resources, students gained appreciation of their natural surroundings."



Sandy's Advice for Green Team Leaders: Sandy said, "Living in New Jersey, we're lucky to have a state full of sustainability experts, nature centers and organizations like Sustainable Jersey, New Jersey Audubon, NJDEP and more. Tap into these resources to find support and inspiration." Sandy mentioned that Sue Slotterback, environmental educator at the [Wetlands Institute](#) was an early mentor to her and Marc Rogoff, the environmental education specialist for NJDEP, has been a great resource.

Sandy's Education and Career Path: Sandy attended Lycoming College, located in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. She started as a theater major but changed course and graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Sociology. After college, she spent five years in social and crisis work. Sandy returned to school and received a Master's degree in Instructional Systems from Penn State University. She taught for two years locally before moving to New Jersey.

What You May Not Know About Sandy: Sandy grew up in Montgomery, Pennsylvania. Her father was an elementary school principal and her mother was a librarian. During the summers, Sandy and her sister, Dee, spent a lot of time outdoors with their parents, who directed summer camps and traveled cross-county. This is where Sandy grew to love nature, she said, "There's nothing better than spending a summer exploring and wading in creeks, turning over stones to look for salamanders." At home, Sandy gardens, recycles, composts, and right now she is raising 30 monarch caterpillars. She is proud of her children: daughter, Brittany, teaches chemistry and environmental science in Randolph, New Jersey. Her son Shawn coaches at the New Jersey Institute of Technology. They just traveled together, as a family, to view the solar eclipse in South Carolina. Sandy has a rescued dog named JoJo who loves to go hiking in [Belleplain State Forest](#). In her free time, Sandy enjoys reading, traveling to see friends and kayaking near her home in Upper Township.