

Cancer

Essential question: “How can we educate others about cancer prevention?”

School: Thurgood Marshall Elementary School, Philadelphia, PA

Appropriate for grades: 5-8

Year of project: 2005-2006

Subjects: English language arts, social studies, science, math

When the father of a student in Ms. Barth’s sixth grade class was in a car accident, physicians ordered x-rays and discovered he had colon cancer. Ms. Barth invited him to share the story of his eventual recovery from cancer with the class. In a reflection after his visit, the students realized that collectively many of them knew people affected by the disease.

In fact, approximately half of them had a family member who had been diagnosed with cancer. Motivated by their desire to effect change, the students decided to focus their yearlong service-learning project on raising money and awareness about cancer.

Putting a human face on the disease helped her students engage in the topic and want to learn more about it, says Ms. Barth. She invited the school nurse to provide a scientific context for the stories of subsequent community partners who visited the class. Students heard from two cancer survivors and also from Liz Scott, the mother of Alex Scott, the little girl whose lemonade stand to raise money for cancer research has become a household word since her death at the age of 8.

Some of the students were initially reluctant to hear the personal accounts. As Hazel Morales reported, “At first I wasn’t interested because I knew that it would hurt some of us to hear people telling their stories. But when the nurse talked to us about how cancer affects red and white blood cells, I got interested.”

Since her students enjoyed planning and conducting fundraisers, Ms. Barth was able to make helpful connections between classroom activities and the core curriculum. Working in groups, students problem solved various aspects of the project, integrating estimation, mean, median and mode; collecting and graphing data and summarizing information they learned from on-line research and from community partner visits. “Oftentimes, the students would point out a curriculum

connection in math, or vocabulary, for example,” said Ms. Barth. “They helped me see the connections.”

Interspersed among their fundraisers and special events, the class worked with the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, the Ronald McDonald House, Alex’s Lemonade Stand and St. Jude’s Children’s Hospital.

Luis Rodriguez felt this was an especially moving part of the project. “When we got the boxes [at the end of the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society ‘Pennies for Patients’ drive] from each class, we felt how much [students in the other grades] care about people with cancer.”