

# Sheree Samsa is Australia's greenest primary teacher

*The fruits of green labour: environmental education is part of the daily curriculum at Churchlands Primary in Perth*



Donna Faragher, Minister for the Environment and Youth, with Churchlands Primary Students

For most primary schools caring for the environment means package-free lunch days, the odd tree planting and maybe some recycling. But at WA's Churchlands Primary School 'going green' meant turning a wasted rubbish heap into a fully productive farm where worm whiz and veggies are sold to parents and endangered frogs can breed in peace in a specially designed frog pond.

Developing the program has taken years of hard work, led by Sheree Samsa who last year won Clean Up Australia's National Green Teacher Award.

"It all started in December 2006 when I watched *An Inconvenient Truth*," Sheree said. "My principal Jim Bray had also seen the documentary and he suggested the idea of an environmental program at the school."

While some schools choose maths, writing or science as a school focus or priority, Churchlands chose environmental studies as its centre of attention.

"As a staff, we set the school priorities each year and it showed, in 2007 and 2008, that the staff all were behind the enviro program by wanting it to be a school priority even before english or maths," Sheree said.

"We decided to make it our priority to clean up a badly neglected area of the school near where we parked our cars."

"From the start, Jim Bray was so supportive – he gave me two afternoons a week to go into the classrooms and talk to the kids about what we were undertaking."

Having dabbled in environmental programs at former schools, Sheree recalls a time when not even paper was recycled at Churchlands.

"I knew there was a long way to go, so I looked at my target audience – kids, teachers and parents – and set up a draft of what I was hoping to achieve," she said.

## Green Team

Soon a "Green Team" had been chosen from interested students and the hard work began. With extremely limited resources, donated materials and a workforce of youngsters and enthusiastic parents, the group cleaned up. Initially, the school made \$1200 towards the project through a 'Say no to plastic bags' program. And then the momentum began.

"I approached Herdsman Fresh, one of our local shops and asked Michelle the marketing manager of the store, to donate 400 calico bags to the school," Sheree said.

"Every student in the school decorated and sold their own hand-crafted calico bag at the shop on Saturday morning to encourage people not to use plastic bags. This idea is now at a lot of schools in the western suburbs and Herdsman Fresh will donate the calico bags to any school that is interested."

The money was spent on equipment like gardening gloves and wheelbarrows; a family with children at the school donated wire for a chook pen.

"I knew that if the program were to be sustainable, it would have to be self-funding, but I also knew that introducing live animals required great care," Sheree said.





The school's free-range eggs are popular with parents; right: Sheree Samsa received her award from Ian Kiernan founder of Clean Up Australia Day

"We were responsible for them and that ultimately came back to me."

To improve facilities, Sheree applied for funding which paid for turf, shade cloth and whiteboards for the "nature classroom" so learning could be done on site. Young artists ensured the new shed was suitably adorned.

"Developing the infrastructure has been a huge job, but now it looks great and the kids and parents love it," Sheree said.

To ensure the project is not neglected during school holidays, parents volunteer for watering duty and ensure the animals and veggies are well cared for.

## Community gardens

Churchlands sits in a built-up suburban area and many of the school's working families live on small blocks with no space, or personal time, for gardens so the 2009 initiative serves a dual purpose.

"Community gardens and a new shade house are going to be established in 2009 along with the Rotary Club of Subiaco who have pledged \$4000 dollars to the school enviro program," Sheree said.

A Rotarian, Sheree will work alongside parents at 'busy bees' to establish the shade house and community plots. "I am lucky to have a great Rotary Club as my own club," she said.

Extending the fruit orchard is another project on the cards for 2009. At the moment the orchard has passionfruit, mandarin, orange, olive, lemon, lime and 20 Quandong trees, which are rare now, but were once native to the area.

Sheree said: "The fruit of the quandongs is rare and expensive, costing over \$120 dollars a kilo. In five years, the kids will be able to taste

this fruit. We have artichokes at the moment!"

The school has even designated an area to grow watermelons for a National Watermelon Competition run by Yates.

## Classes take turns to care

Every class in the school has a turn at caring for the entire system for a week at a time, with students responsible for collecting rubbish, sorting the recycling, shredding paper bags from the lunch orders, tending to the gardens and animals and selling the produce.

Yet another factor to the program's success is Sheree Samsa's ability to keep the learning fresh.

"2008 was the International Year of the Potato, so we had a potato growing competition between the classes, with the potatoes growing in stacks of tyres. Then the children picked them and we made potato fritters and potato bake, it's important that they cook what they grow so they appreciate the full value of all of this."

## Haven for croakers

Last year was also the Year of the Frog and Sheree conducted extensive research about frogs and worked with staff to develop a frog habitat.

"The frog pond came about because the Year 1, 2, 3 classes studied frogs for the Year of the Frog," Sheree said. "I learned all about frogs from the Gould League at Herdsman Wildlife Centre and by reading up about frogs on the internet.

"I also mentored a teaching prac student from Edith Cowan University for one term, he helped with the frog habitat as his school community project."

Wembley City Farmers also donated \$300 towards the frog pond.

The school's deputy principal, Mark Jones,

has grown native trees for the past 15 years and he has encouraged students to be involved in the planting process. Propagating native trees is now in the charge of Lyn Metcalf, another staff member, who also has a frog bog near the middle primary area of the school.

## Integrated enviro learning

Like most schools, Churchlands has always dabbled in environmental activities but it is Sheree Samsa's strong skills base and devotion that has united these activities, such as linking the 9R shed to education curriculum outcomes.

"At CPS, enviro studies is not an extra subject, we integrate our learning by using the 9R shed as a hands-on vehicle to achieve exciting lessons for the students. A by product of the program is that the curriculum is covered in a more meaningful way," Sheree said.

"I have always been passionate about the environment but I never imagined that I could develop something as big as this. To be able to pass that on is so rewarding – we have had about 80 teachers, parents and community members come through and they ask questions and take photos of how we do things. I achieved my Level 3 status in 2007, so this has allowed me extra time to share my ideas with other teachers."

"We're at a good stage now, but there were nights I would leave here at 6 pm each night. If it had not been for the other teachers getting on board and the support of the principal, the program never would have worked the way it did.

"I was just lucky my principal saw that this needed someone to drive it, and gave me the opportunity to do just that."