Nature Explorium under way at Middle Country Public Library

MCPL staff members Sandy Feinberg, Deborah Hempe, Diana Gallo and Sharon Breen pose with bricklayers Jorge Querido and Mario Martins of Laser Industries, and local children Samantha Ryan and Jacqueline Zorcik with bricks depicting wildlife donated by the MCPL Friends to library's soon-to-open nature exploration center. See story on page A8.
MC library to open nature exploration center

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Explore nature ... at the Middle Country library.

The Middle Country Public Library branch in Centereach will be home to an interactive 5,000-square-foot outdoor Nature Explorium by this summer, officials announced last week.

Working with the Dimensions Educational Research Foundation, the Long Island Nature Collaborative for Kids and the Middle Country Coalition for Smart Growth, MCPL staff developed the idea for a hands-on center where children have access to an outdoor setting ripe with educational opportunities, according to library Director Sandy Feinberg.

With plans to open by early June, the Nature Explorium aims to provide free recreational and educational programs for children and families to become engaged in and knowledgeable about nature and their outdoor surroundings.

"This was like the perfect model," Feinberg said. "We were just looking for this type of environment because it's a learning environment to really engage children."

The director, who joined MCPL in 1971, said there will be several areas in the explorium where children can participate in various hands-on activities such as planting seeds, performing plays and music, arts and crafts using natural materials, and good, old-fashioned playing with dirt.

To tie in the theme of literacy, the brick path in the explorium will be engraved with book titles and quotes chosen by donors who have contributed funding to help construct the outdoor center, according to Feinberg. To fund the total cost of the project, about $300,000, the library has supplied $150,000 while fund-raising efforts have provided about $100,000 to date. The Friends of the Middle Country Public Library also donated a brick bench on which pictures of native Long Island animals and their names have been engraved.

The Nature Explorium will be "really dynamic," Feinberg said, and the children are "just going to love this place. It's just really special."

Dedicated to exploration and discovery, the Explorium will be open to the public during daylight hours in the spring and summer to provide children with the

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Above, this library courtyard in Centereach is being transformed into the Nature Explorium. 
Below, library Director Sandy Feinberg, left, poses with future Explorium Director Tracy Delgado-LaStella.

**Nature Explorium**

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opportunity to learn and reinforce the development of observation, visual-spatial and social skills, according to information provided by the library director. Educational programs, both group-oriented and self-directed, will focus on preschool through upper elementary school-aged children and their parents or caregivers.

MCPL Coordinator of Youth Services Tracy Delgado-LaStella, who will serve as the Nature Explorium director, said the outdoor learning center will provide an environment where children can have contact with nature and participate in active programs instead of sitting in front of the television or playing video games. “I think giving them a little taste of nature will help them appreciate the environment,” Delgado-LaStella said.

The coordinator, a Mount Sinai resident who grew up in Selden, said outdoor programs from last summer that will take place in the Explorium this year include Go Outside, which encourages nature exploration through art, water, rocks and dirt, and life under the Earth’s surface; Concept Connections, a program that introduces participants to early literacy concepts and fine-motor learning activities; Nature Exploration, which teaches children about birds and seeds; and Nature Journaling, a writers workshop for upper elementary and middle school-aged children.

Delgado-LaStella, who joined the library 20 years ago, said the Explorium will also be beneficial to the community because “people need free places to go” where they can “just enjoy some family time” without worrying about spending money.

Noting her plans to bring her own two young children to the outdoor center, the coordinator said, “They will love it.”