

# Towson

News Maryland Baltimore County Towson

## Towson preschool goes back to nature with new 'play space'



Kindergartener Bea McLoughlin climbs on a log in a new play space outside Brown Memorial Woodbrook Presbyterian Church, which houses Brown Memorial Weekday School. (Staff photo by Larry Perl)

By **Larry Perl** Towson Times

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The new, nature-themed playground at the Brown Memorial Weekday School was funded with a \$10,000 grant from BG

Allison Bond is worried that today's children are victims of an environmental malaise — a lost connection with nature.

Bond remembers climbing trees and playing outside when she was growing up, but nowadays, she thinks children are too tied to their electronic devices and are afraid of taking risks and getting hurt.

"It's an epidemic," she said. "Children need to get outside and play. We need to get kids off those computers and back outside."

Toward that end, Bond, executive director of the Brown Memorial Weekday School, a preschool in Rodgers Forge, has added a nature component to its curriculum, including creating a nature-themed play area that will be dedicated in a ribbon-cutting ceremony Friday, Sept. 18.

Using a \$10,000 "Green Grant" from Baltimore Gas & Electric Co., the Weekday School — which is affiliated with Brown Memorial Woodbrook Presbyterian Church but is not a religious school — has reinvented its former playground as a "play space," designed to get children back to nature.

"We took out the old, very traditional-looking playground equipment and replaced it with logs for climbing and stumps for jumping," Bond said. Rather than having children do "prescribed play" in a traditional playground, "We wanted them to come up with their own ideas."

The school has had a lot of help. Davey Tree workers and the parents of the school's 104 children helped haul in large logs that children can use as anything from climbing structures to "houses" with blankets thrown over the logs, Bond said.

"Parents came on weekends to help us do this," Bond said. She said the school draws families from as far away as Parkville in Baltimore County and downtown Baltimore City, and that very few of the enrollees are children of Brown Memorial Woodbrook parishioners.

Board members of Robert E. Lee Park helped design the play space, Bond said. The area was mulched earlier this summer. Robert E. Lee Park Ranger Shannon Davis and Davey Tree manager Kevin Mullinary are expected to be on hand for the dedication ceremony, Bond said.

Features of the revamped play area, roughly 50 feet long by 20 feet wide, include tree branch-climbing structures, vegetable and native plant gardens, a certified monarch butterfly way station, a teepee, and an outdoor play kitchen where kids can make mud pies.

The Weekday School has also promoted Alice Wetzel, formerly an assistant teacher in the preschool's parent-child class, to be a fourth-grade classroom teacher and the school's nature coordinator, Bond said.

The play space has been in use since last year, even in the rain, and will be open year-round, even when it snows.

"We'll go sledding," Bond said.

The dedication ceremony will stress the environmental theme, with a pasta bar and a vegetable bar stocked partly with veggies that children have grown in the school garden, Bond said.

And the school is promoting its emphasis on nature in various ways inside the building. Children can pick up backpacks at school that come with butterfly nets sticking out of them and magnifying glasses inside. In one stairwell, a bulletin board is filled with photos of children doing environmental activities such as composting. A headline over the photos says, "Wildlife Stewards."

The play space is an important addition for the school because, "it gives you a connection to nature that we feel so many children are missing out on," she said. "It's getting children to look at things around them."