Nomination Statement

Up to two pages describing the contribution, with details of the nominee's role and the extent to which the contribution has benefited Fairfax County.

I would like to nominate Maureen Goble, a Fairfax County resident, teacher, and the Director of the AP Environmental Science Program at Lake Braddock Secondary School, for the 2010 Environmental Excellence Award.

Ever since Earth Sangha, together with the Stormwater Planning Division of the Fairfax County Department of Public Works (DPWES) and the Fairfax County Park Authority (FCPA), launched an initiative in 2005 to restore the County's riparian (stream-bank) buffers, Maureen Goble has played a critical role, ensuring the success of the project. And belatedly, I would like to honor her direct contribution to that project and other park restoration projects, with this nomination.

By the time the program ended officially because of budget shortfalls in early 2009, about 10,000 plants, representing over 80 species, had been planted on about 30 sites covering over 18 acres, along more than 2 miles of stream bank. Over 1,500 volunteers had participated. Almost all of these sites were badly infested with a variety of exotic invasive plant species and thus needed a considerable amount of preparation, such as pulling invasive plants, before the planting was possible. As a consequence, there was more work involved than these numbers even suggest. For the majority of these sites, several repeated visits and maintenance work was essential, and now as a result, these places look visibly different.

However, at the beginning of 2005 when we first launched the project, we had no idea if we could recruit enough volunteers to do the work. The officials from the DPWES and FCPA expressed doubts that the project could be accomplished entirely by volunteers. To put it bluntly, the prevailing consensus among the participants was that nobody could be sure exactly how this project might turn out and how much it might cost.

Since I was the one who was responsible for scheduling all our fieldwork events and recruiting volunteers, I was nervous about our ability to engage volunteers in tough field sites that, in most cases, were covered with thorny multiflora rose shrubs and imbedded with poison ivy. We figured that few busy professionals wanting to donate a couple of weekend hours volunteering would have the patience to deal with such conditions on a repeat basis.

As soon as we launched our initial work at Carney Park in the Spring of 2005, we encountered some interesting development in the field. We thought we recruited 20 volunteers, but we ended up having over 80 volunteers and most of them were young and energetic high school students. We moved our next major work site to Lake Fairfax Park in the western part of the County, and these students followed us. The result was that we had a broad representative of volunteers of all age groups and a wide spectrum of professionals. Most often, the students accompanied their parents who worked just as hard or harder. Even before the first season was over, everyone declared the project a resounding success. The DPWES officials said that they now had a better understanding of the field dynamics and were able to come up with the realistic budget estimates and establish overall project goals. You could hear a collective sigh of relief all around.

Each time when I spoke to these students, they all said they were from AP Environmental Science classes at Lake Braddock Secondary School and their teacher was Maureen Goble. They said she gave them the information about our restoration work and encouraged them to participate. It turned out that Maureen was responsible for designing the whole AP Environmental Science curriculum at the Lake Braddock SS and she required at least 4 hours of environmental community service in each semester to complete her course.

Nomination Statement

Up to two pages describing the contribution, with details of the nominee's role and the extent to which the contribution has benefited Fairfax County.

I cannot help but notice that most of her students spoke admirably of her and seemed pleased with the work that they helped accomplish. I learned subsequently that it was Maureen who had first started this idea of including mandatory community service hours to complete Environmental Science courses, in the local schools. Pretty soon, the idea had spread and was adopted by other schools, albeit on much smaller scales.

I began to communicate with Maureen regularly as she wanted to hear the feedback about her students' performance in the field. I quickly realized that she was no ordinary teacher. She wanted to make sure that her students' field experiences would provide real and important connections with what they learned in class. "Many kids have never planted anything outside," she said. "But as they work, they can look at the plant as they pull it out of the pot and see how tightly the roots hold onto soil and relate that to erosion. They can compare a vegetated area to one that is not. They can look around and actually see the things that we talk about in class. It's a different way of learning," she said. Every season, Maureen organized and accompanied her class to work on our fieldwork sites. When she's present, you can feel the energy, the loving and trusting kind, which is hard to explain if you're not there to witness it, surround the students. I could not help but notice just how much her students admired her. I met some very bright and enlightened students of hers who moved on to attend some great colleges, declaring that they will study Environmental Science. Maureen has proved to her students that protecting the environment is something desirable and cool.

From the year of 2005 onwards, Maureen has become one of the most important partners in our ecological restoration work, not just for the County Stream Buffer Restoration Project but also for our other projects. Her students continue to help us restore the 20-acre Marie Butler Leven Preserve in McLean into a "Native Arboretum," a living library of local native plants, and they also help with various restoration projects at the Meadowood Recreation Area in Lorton. We filled up all the weekends during the Spring and the Fall with different kinds of fieldwork events, with the confidence of knowing that we have Maureen as a partner. Maureen even changed her curriculum to include the ecology of streamside forest as a topic, so that her students could make the most out of their involvement in the Stream Buffer Restoration Project. There were times that I would call her and ask her to recruit her students when my other volunteer groups cancelled unexpectedly. At one point, I called her only two days before a big event. Her response was overwhelming: she brought her 90 students to plant 500 tree seedlings! She supervised, encouraged, and showed her students how to have fun while working in the field.

Since 2005, Maureen has dispatched, several times over the same year, anywhere from 200 to 400 students a year to our Stream Buffer Restoration Project. Each student performed about 4 hours per semester. That would come to 800 to 1600 hours per semester, and 3,200 to 6,400 hours per year! Even after the Stream Buffer Project officially ended in the Spring 2009, Maureen has steadily supported our effort of continuing the work. Of the 11,000 volunteer hours that Earth Sangha logged in for 2009, Maureen's students contributed to more than 50% of them. Maureen and I frequently communicate information online. She sends me the list of the students she has recruited, and I check the names of students who worked. Sometimes, I ask Maureen to supply us with a small group of students for a specific task, and she finds the students whose interests identify most with the task! In turn, we have hired several of her students as paid summer interns. Her understanding of her students' abilities and emotional needs have proven to be most valuable. Over the years, we have all regarded her students as our best asset, not just they assist us in an immediate sense, but also because they represent our best hopes for the future of overall environmental health.