

**PRESS RELEASE
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ETCF Grant Grows Local Collaboration

Tool Elementary School will kick off the upcoming school year with a new teaching tool. A partnership between the Malakoff Independent School District and local Henderson County nonprofits launched the creation of an outdoor garden classroom focusing on the benefits of sustainability, community improvement and nutrition.

The outdoor classroom named *Miss Fran's Teaching Garden* was made possible through collaboration between Cedar Creek Garden Club, Tool Elementary School and the Community Food Pantry of Tool. Funding for the project was provided in part by a grant from the Edwin A. "Blue" and Janice Owen Miller Charitable Fund held at East Texas Communities Foundation (ETCF) in Tyler, Texas.

"Innovative projects like *Miss Fran's Teaching Garden* would have been the exact type of project that the Miller's would have supported in their lifetime," said Kyle Penney, President of East Texas Communities Foundation (ETCF). "ETCF is pleased to be able to fulfill the Miller's legacy by supporting this outdoor classroom project that will provide hands-on learning to the students and benefit the community for years to come."

Brandi Sutton, Principal of Tool Elementary School, has always envisioned an outdoor learning space for her campus. "A garden had always been on my wish list," said Sutton. "When I received the call from the Cedar Creek Garden Club I knew this was the bridge needed to make my dream a reality."

The Cedar Creek Garden Club, which was founded in 1975, had always had a central focus on the love and the art of gardening. The club set out to renew their purpose in 2020 and saw a need to expand their mission priorities to include an investment in education and nutrition for the benefit of future generations of gardeners.

"I'm neither a gardener, a teacher or a parent, yet here I am, promoting a Teaching Garden at Tool Elementary," says Debbie Bozeman-Zook, newly-elected President for the Cedar Creek Garden Club. "There are so many pay-offs to the students and this community when the children learn the lessons only a garden can teach."

Bozeman-Zook said lessons will line up with the curriculums teachers are already teaching. Specific topics will vary by grade level, with younger children learning about colors of the garden and counting plants. Older students will learn more math and science-based topics, such as how many plants will fit into a certain area and plant life-cycles.

Miss Fran's Teaching Garden is named in honor of long-time Tool resident and community leader, Fran Sonka. Ms. Sonka retired to the Tool community in 1991 and went on to serve on the City Council for 17 years, two of those as mayor. After the opening of Tool Elementary School in 2007, Ms. Sonka made it a point to greet the students with a hug every morning as they entered the school. "I can't say enough the impact Fran has had on our students," said Sutton. "Naming the garden in her honor is only fitting."

Organizers plan for the garden to not only provide opportunities for the students, but the community itself. "Our goal is to harvest and distribute fresh produce for the food pantry to serve our most vulnerable in the community," said Bozeman-Zook. "That's were collaboration with the Community Food Pantry will play a big part in this partnership."

Vicki Dumont, Executive Director of the Community Food Pantry in Tool, also envisioned a community garden and was thrilled when the project was presented. "The Food Pantry serves an average of 400 families a month," said Dumont. "We are always lacking fresh produce for our clients. What this garden will do for our students and community will be a game-changer."

"Many studies show that school gardens provide a context to teach students to be advocates for themselves, their communities, and the Earth," said Sutton. "Our hope is that *Miss Fran's Teaching Garden* will encourage students to think critically about the food they eat and gain life-long skills in making healthy choices down the road."

About ETCF.org

East Texas East Texas Communities Foundation is a nonprofit corporation serving 32 counties in East Texas. The Foundation distributed \$9.2 million in grants in 2020 and currently manages over \$124 million in over 400 unique charitable funds which support non-profit organizations and student scholarships. The Foundation, which was formed in 1989, has awarded over \$108 million in grants and scholarships since its inception. Philanthropy builds community and changes lives. East Texas Communities Foundation supports philanthropy by offering simple ways for donors to achieve their charitable goals.



Brandi Sutton, Principal at Tool Elementary School, is pictured with ETCF Program Officer, Dana Durman, during the grant check presentation from the Edwin A. "Blue" and Janice Owen Miller Charitable Fund. The grant will be used to complete an outdoor classroom and teaching garden on the elementary campus.



Program Officer Dana Durman stands in front of the sign promoting the new addition of *Miss Fran's Teaching Garden* on the campus of Tool Elementary School.