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5th Graders Take Part In Environmental Plan

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TARRYTOWN

JASON ROZZI, 11, a fifth grader at the Washington Irving Middle School here, stood extra tall as he said: "We have a problem in our family. We don't turn off lights. I taught everybody how to break that habit."

A classmate, Rosalind Pressman 10, said: "We used to leave water dripping from a faucet so the cats could play with it. I've explained why we can't do that, and now we don't."

Another fifth-grader, Nadia Mosa, 11, said: "My sister in college is always Miss Genius: Finally, I got to teach my family something. It felt weird." Then, with a grin she said, "It felt wonderful."

Five fifth-grade classes took part in a five-week environmental project, "Journey for the Planet," which culminated in a program at the school of skits and essays to illustrate in children's terms how to build an earth-friendly life. Catch phrases like, "Don't you realize wasting water is all wet?" and "You can get a big charge out of saving energy," woke up the audience, which included a group from Global Action Plan for the Earth, a nonprofit environmental organization based in Woodstock, and the program's designers.

Developed over the last five years, this environmental adventure has been launched in more than 40 school systems nationwide with nearly 3000 children tak-

ing part. Also present were Eileen Pilla, the mayor of Tarrytown, and a goodwill ambassador from Ciba Corporation, which financed the project.

There was no mistaking the feeling of empowerment and seriousness of purpose, which rippled through the Washington Irving School assembly hall as the fifth graders challenged the audience to treat the earth kindly. The children had learned how to change their environmental habits in their daily lives and were bent on enlightening the adults.

An enthusiastic Rachel Glickhouse, 11, said, "Back in former times like the 60's they didn't learn how to clean the earth, and now we kids are here to teach them. We have to prove to the entire world that American kids are caring people and not just litterers."

David Gershon, president of Global Action Plan and principal designer of "Journey for the Planet," grinned as he saw his brainchild come to life through the children on stage. "There is so much education going on here," he said.

Much more than planting seeds in a milk carton and watching them grow on the school window sill, the program has five sections, dealing with garbage, water, energy, eco-wise consumerism, and getting others in the community involved. The focus is on everyday habits and how to take action.

With a choice of 48 actions, which earned points toward a "Global Hero" cer-

tificate and a patch from the United Nations Environmental Program, the children began to take shorter showers, use lunch boxes instead of paper bags, encourage their parents to join car pools, switch to rechargeable batteries in their toys, buy school notebooks of recycled paper and check for air leakage around windows and refrigerator doors.

Terry Hill, mother of Lindsay Hill, 11, said: "This got Lindsay so involved because she was the one responsible, not me. She sets the table with enthusiasm, making sure we use cloth napkins."

Though the program here is officially over, the children are making plans to expand the recycling system in their school. Offended by the styrofoam trays in the cafeteria, some are asking suppliers to find a more earth-friendly alternative.

Why were the children so motivated? Teachers said the "Journey" was an opportunity for everyone — families, the school and community supporters. What was it that allowed this to happen?

Mr. Gershon had some thoughts. "There are so few opportunities for us to feel the experience of true purpose in life, the ability to make a difference in how we live our lives. 'Journey' is a vehicle which allows children to 'walk their talk.' They feel highly credible in the adult world, highly authentic. Children rarely have this opportunity."

'Treat the earth kindly,' a five-week project for school classes urges.

The program involves building a whole life style, Mr. Gershon said, rather than taking an isolated action or two along the way like writing a letter or planting a tree. "My experience is that the process evokes a sense of meaning just by how we live."

The children have served as role models, and the community is responding. Mayor Pilla said, "I'm here because it's important for young people to know that the Mayor is interested in their lives." A follow-up, meeting is scheduled with Global Action Plan, Mayor Pilla and city officials to consider the organization's adult program, sponsored by the President's Council for Sustainable Development. That program is aimed at households throughout the community.

The children flocked around Mr. Gershon, whom they called their earth hero, to ask for his autograph. He seized the opportunity to write, "Thank you for taking care of our planet." It reinforces the value of what they are doing, he said. As he signed 11-year-old Brenda Molina's book, he said he was pleased to know that he and his earth-friendly message were in the highest company. "This is the very best day of my life," Brenda said. "The other two are when I saw the Pope and when I met Whitney Houston."