



## EIGHTH-GRADERS 'GREEN' PLAQUEMINES, EARN STATE & U.S. ARMY ACCOLADES

BY BETH DONZE

It's not every day that 4,500 trees get their start.

But that's just what three students from last year's eighth-grade class at Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Belle Chasse accomplished over one weekend last February.

A project organized by the trio in their religion class, dubbed "Replanting Plaquemines Parish," put thousands of bald cypress, Chinese elm, pecan and oak tree seedlings into the hands of interested parish residents and business owners.

Helmed by Josie Bridges, Elisia Kravet and James Johnson, the project was recognized last May by eCYBERMISSION.com, a Web-based competition sponsored by the U.S. Army that recognizes young people's efforts to make their communities better through science, math and technology. As regional winners of the contest's "Benefit to the Community" category, each team member received a \$2,000 saving's bond from the Army.

"We were trying to help everyone in the community, not just one little part, especially after losing so many trees in Katrina and Gustav," said Josie of the tree distribution program. "Trees do so much for the environment: They emit oxygen, they help keep soil where it's needed and reduce carbon in the atmosphere," she said.

The students worked closely with local Plaquemines Parish officials to get the tree giveaway off the ground, meeting with Billy Nungesser, parish president, and P.J. Hahn, director of Coastal Zone Management. They appeared on and made a

commercial for "Talk Plaquemines," a local cable program, and blanketed schools, churches and civic groups with tree order forms. Lisa Manda of the state's department of agriculture helped them order the seedlings, which were paid for by Plaquemines Parish.

"We didn't think we could do it," said Elisia, recalling the February weekend she and other

volunteers distributed the 4,500 seedlings at two locations: Our Lady of Perpetual Help School and St. Patrick Church in Port Sulphur. Each order of trees was painstakingly grouped by the customer's last name and tagged for pickup to avoid "a big commotion," Elisia said.

"One woman was devastated that she had to cut down an old tree that was too close to her house," Elisia recalled. "She was crying because she was so happy she could plant her new cypress tree and get (her property) back to the way it was."

Entering the contest was a no-brainer. The young people's religion teacher, Heather Giordano, uses the eCYBERMISSION Web site as a resource for her students' year-long study of the principles of Catholic social teaching. In conjunction with their classroom work, Giordano's eighth-graders must also complete a year-long social justice project.

Mike Strain, Louisiana's commissioner of agriculture, was so impressed with the students' PowerPoint presentation on their tree-distribution effort, he invited them to Baton Rouge



Pictured with Supriya Jindal (fourth from left) during their April visit to the Governor's Mansion are the seven members of Our Lady of Perpetual Help's eighth-grade class of 2009: Nikki Lopez, Elisia Kravet, James Johnson, Marisela Varela, Morgan Ancar, Josie Bridges and Deanna Cheatham. (Photo courtesy of OLPH School, Belle Chasse)

to present it to all his department heads.

"It was impressive: three eighth graders showing (elected officials) how to run a program," Giordano said, noting that the

program may become a pilot at other Louisiana schools in the wake of its commendation last May from the state Legislature. Last year's entire eighth-grade class, whose other



Saplings, such as this bald cypress, are taking hold throughout Plaquemines Parish thanks to students at Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Belle Chasse. (Photo by Beth Donze)

four members worked on ways to step up recycling in Plaquemines Parish as their religion project, will be featured on posters in the upcoming campaign, "Go Green, Louisiana!"



## STUDENTS' ART DISPLAYED IN BATON ROUGE



Each month, Supriya Jindal, Louisiana's first lady, asks the Louisiana Art Educators Association to select art created by young people from across the state for inclusion in a changing monthly exhibit at the Governor's Mansion. Among the artists featured in August were two students from St. Edward the Confessor. Seventh-grader Megan Campbell (left) was recognized for a pastel still life she drew as a sixth-grader, while Sean Goebel (right) was singled out for his watercolor of a tree, which he submitted as a St. Edward seventh-grader. Sean is now an eighth-grader at Archbishop Rummel High. St. Edward's art teacher is Carolee Miller. (Photos courtesy of the artists' families)