

## For at-risk students, this maze highly navigable

The Boston Globe

### At Molloy School, a garden of growth

By Russell Contreras, Globe Staff | June 5, 2008

It wasn't where Matthew Villanueva expected to find himself at this point in his life. The 17-year-old freshman attends the Hugh J. Molloy Alternative School - a school that aims to get truant and troubled students through tough times.

But last week, Villanueva was proud to be at the Molloy. That's because he and about 30 students took part in erecting a labyrinth garden. The garden, located on each side of the front entrance, consisted of two small wooded mazes sitting where nothing but empty space stood before.

For weeks now, students have been studying art and talking about ways to improve the school's image. Their choice for a project finally came to life last week, when students worked together planting flowers, assembling wood, and decorating the edges.

Alison Nesbitt, the education coordinator of Lowell's Revolving Museum and the person who helped guide students with their project, said the labyrinth garden came out of the idea that something was needed to brighten up the exterior of the old brick building.

It was designed to symbolize the potential growth of students and make them proud of leaving something behind for later classes, said Nesbitt.

"What's going on inside [the school] is just so not reflective on the outside," said Nesbitt. "We wanted to broadcast the identity of the kids themselves. There are so many good things that go on here every day."

For two years now, the Revolving Museum has sent Nesbitt to push students on art projects that would enhance the look of this Lowell public school. Last year, the museum spearheaded an effort to create a mural at the entrance showing students inside the school. That project took 20 weeks to complete.

A year later, the mural hasn't been defaced. "Students have been very respectful of it," said Nesbitt. "No one has painted or written over it or anything."

Molloy Principal Kathy Akashian said the art projects are important because they not only help add art to the school, but force students to work as a team. "Many of these students have issues with peers," said Akashian. "As you can see, they're working together. They're cooperating. They can see their accomplishments and successes. It absolutely helps them with their social skills."

Students at the Molloy School have been referred by Lowell High School and most likely faced serious problems, said Akashian. The school offers smaller learning environments and focuses on getting the students back into Lowell High School so they can graduate, she said.

The school has an enrollment of 95 students in Grades 9 through 12.

Among those helping with the garden project was Angel Molina, a 16-year-old sophomore who arrived three weeks earlier, after "a little incident" at Lowell High. Molina said it was easy working with the other students on the garden and they didn't mind working with the new kid.

"I think it's coming out pretty nice," said Molina, as he glanced at other students putting finishing touches on the 150 square feet of garden.

Molina said he hopes the museum is able to help out students next year with another project. But by then he hopes to be back at Lowell High.

So does Villanueva. Both want to graduate and enroll in college.

Creating the garden was a chance for students to forget their problems and work on something fun, Villanueva said.

"We barely do anything fun here, so this is a chance for us to have fun, you know?" said Villanueva. "We learn how to build stuff."

*Russell Contreras can be reached at [rcontreras@globe.com](mailto:rcontreras@globe.com). ■*

© [Copyright](#) 2008 The New York Times Company