palomar Elementary School in Chula Vista, Calif., is in a rough part of town. Its 350 students have seen a lot, probably more than they should have at their young ages. As far as California public schools go, it’s small—but mighty.

In the seven years Mary Anne Arabia has taught at Palomar, she’s always been bothered by the lack of shade on the playground. It’s most abrasive during the school’s annual end-of-year Olympics, when parents and grandparents come to watch.

Palomar is a generational school; many of the students’ parents and grandparents graduated from there. So the annual Olympics is a big deal. Parents often take a day off work to attend. Like the students, they bake beneath the blazing sun.

“I thought, oh my goodness, our playground is basically this asphalt jungle. The kids don’t have anywhere to go for shade,” Arabia says.

So when the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute (OPEI) and Discovery Education teamed up again this year for their annual Spruce Up Your School sweepstakes, Arabia flooded the ballot box with as many votes as she could.

“I voted every day for a couple months, then I forgot about it,” she says. Until, that is, mid-March, when Discovery Education called to tell her she’d won the grand prize. “I was so excited, I literally jumped around and called my
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the soccer field during games. “It looks like a park,” Arabia says now. “There’s been nothing like this in the 52 years the school’s been open.”

Heaviland Director of Field Operations Oscar Hernandez oversaw the project. “You know what, at first, without knowing anything, I thought, I can take care of this no problem,” says Hernandez. “But during the process, seeing the passion Mary Anne had and what she went through to win the prize from Discovery and OPEI, it was amazing, amazing to be part of it.”

Arabia’s passion energized the Heaviland crew, Hernandez says. “She broke down in tears to see the trees going up,” Hernandez recalls. “It gave us more motivation to make sure everything looked good.”

“I absolutely got emotional, because I thought, these trees’ll be here long after I am,” Arabia says. “I was telling my students, ‘You can come back and say, these are my trees, this is my project.’ To me, there’s nothing that’s as beautiful as a tree. It’s going to live and grow for a long time, and that’s how I feel about my teaching.”

Grand unveiling

The trees and benches were unveiled to the students on May 15. The trees are emblazoned with plaques for each grade, so every student will have some sort of ownership over them. At the unveiling, Heaviland spoke to students about trees’ benefits and their important role in the ecosystem. Heaviland employees sponsor families during the holidays and assist military families from time to time, but the Palomar project was unique. “To be involved in the community and to educate people about the benefits of landscaping, it makes you feel good, and I hope to do more of it,” Heaviland says. “Hopefully this has given us incentive to go seeking projects like this in the future.”

When she sees the trees, Arabia always will be reminded of how far the school’s come, and of all the people who made the renovation possible. “We’re like The Little Engine That Could,” she says. “Palomar’s always been a gem, but now other people are starting to see that, too.”

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