

Heaviland Enterprises planted 10 large-canopy magnolia grandiflora trees at an elementary school as part of the Spruce Up Your School sweepstakes.



A SEAT IN THE SHADE

Heaviland Enterprises joins OPEI and Discovery to give one school a gift for the ages.

BY **BETH GERACI** SENIOR EDITOR

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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principal," Arabia says. "I was screaming."

The contest awards \$5,000 to an educator who wants to add green space to his or her school. Arabia was chosen at random from more than 15,000 entries from around the country.

Arabia thought about how much the green space would mean to her fifth-grade students. "Ours is a little school," Arabia says. "It's in a tough area. These are kids that don't have a lot."

Even so, Palomar Elementary is rising. It's the recipient of the 2012 California Distinguished School Award and the 2012 Title I Academic Achievement Award. It's also up for the National Blue Ribbon Award.

Helping hands

As excited as Arabia was about winning, she was at a loss for what greenery to buy. Then she got the call from the Professional Landcare Network



(PLANET). Member Tom Heaviland of San Diego-based Heaviland Enterprises had signed on to do the project for free.

"We said, 'This sounds like a great program and something we can certainly join forces with,'" says Heaviland of why his company got involved. "This was nice. It just felt good, you know. Great class, great school, great history. There was just a good vibe about it."

Since the project would be a surprise for the students, Heaviland's crew did the project on the weekend, planting 10 large-canopy magnolia grandiflora trees.

The Spruce Up Your School sweepstakes is part of OPEI's TurfMutt program, a curriculum designed to encourage youths to appreciate green space.

The trees were 36-inch box size, "fairly big," Heaviland says. "We wanted something that was well established, that was going to be attractive, that would provide some height and be relatively maintenance-free."

The Heaviland crew also obtained and installed four backless steel benches so spectators can face either the track or

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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 absolutely got emotional, because I thought, these trees'll be here long after I am." —MARY ANNE ARABIA

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." LM

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