



Students, above and left, plant trees along Lucille Avenue in the Westview neighborhood.

PHOTOS: CHRISTOPHER T. MARTIN

# Nature's classroom

## Trees Atlanta creates a living laboratory for students

BY MEAGHAN CASEY

Trees Atlanta proves that nature is the ideal classroom.

Since 1985, the nonprofit organization has been focused on replenishing and conserving Atlanta's trees while creating more green space in the city. Its new mission involves planting roots in Atlanta Public Schools by introducing students to the great outdoors through the BeltLine Arboretum Education program, which turns school campuses into interactive classrooms.

"It's about personal stewardship and empowerment," said Robby Astrove, program coordinator for Trees Atlanta. "It's a discovery process for students to plant the seed and watch it grow. I hope these students bring back their grandchildren and say, 'Look, I planted that tree.'"

The arboretum project is part of Atlanta BeltLine — a project that will transform a loop of unused railroads and surrounding parks into interconnected neighborhoods, complete with pedestrian-friendly transit and plenty of greenspace. Trees Atlanta has begun work on a linear arboretum that will span the entire 22-mile BeltLine, creating the world's longest arboretum — one that will educate residents and visitors about the



Greg Levine, left, and Robby Astrove of Trees Atlanta plant a tree at KIPP STRIVE.

tremendous health, energy-saving and economic benefits of urban trees. The project also will integrate Atlanta's history and include environmental art sculptures, native tree species and plenty of educational features.

Trees Atlanta, in partnership with the Atlanta Audubon Society, kicked off its

education program earlier this year at Brown Middle School, planting more than 350 trees and shrubs on a three-acre plot of land next to the campus. Nearly 150 students took part in the project, planting trees with assistance from Trees Atlanta and Audubon volunteers.

"Before, the area was full of damaging, invasive, exotic plants," said Astrove.

"Students restored the space into a bird-friendly habitat using Georgia native plants which will attract butterflies and other wildlife."

Thanks to the transformation, Brown teachers and students have an incredible living classroom not only to study trees and birds, but to read and write, study local history and observe nature's mathematical patterns.

"We're trying to make it a living laboratory," said Astrove. "Projects like this are unique as they offer cooperative learning, encourage critical thinking and create a tangible legacy which can be shared with the community for generations."

The outdoor classroom at Brown will also be an important place to learn about locally grown food. Many edible trees and shrubs will be planted to promote healthy eating habits and agricultural education.

Additional schools along the BeltLine — including KIPP STRIVE Academy, Inman Middle School, Grady High, Tech High and Atlanta Charter Middle School — also will benefit from outdoor classrooms. In October, Brown and KIPP students planted an additional 60 trees in the West End and West View neighborhoods of the BeltLine.