

This past year, one of our founding Garden Coordinators left his role at Johnson Elementary. Rick Harden came on as one of two parents overseeing the Johnson Garden engagement in 2012. A man of many skills and talents including beautiful woodworking, Rick ran the garden at Johnson Elementary school for 7 years. While at Johnson Rick designed and built raised beds, benches, an accessible bed designed with engaging all Johnson students in mind. His most recent woodworking projects included benches that made their way to numerous schools and garden locations and the wonderful outdoor mud kitchen at Johnson. Rick cultivated a garden grounded in exploration, inquiry, and fun.

The pictures that came out of days in the garden with Rick were the kind that immediately melts hearts: students smiling with a shovel in one hand and a worm in the other, magnifying glasses held over roly polies, and mud cupcakes going into the oven. The experience for many students during Rick's time at Johnson was the kind of imagination and joy that we hope all of the gardens bring out in our students. Mr. Rick inspired so much imagination in students because his imagination and commitment to building a welcoming, beautiful space was incorporated in every project he did in that space.









This past fall Rick transitioned out of his role at Johnson and I took on Johnson as my third school. I was excited about engaging with new students and teachers in a new-to-me garden space; however, there were nerves about living up to the legacy of Mr. Rick! Many students at Johnson have come to know Rick and the garden as inseparable, as he has been there year after year with them exploring and learning. They even came up with a catchy rhyme: Mr. Harden in the Garden!



Last week I had my first full two days with back to back classes at Johnson and it was truly an amazing experience. Students did a scavenger hunt and the leftover time was for free exploration: playing in the mud kitchen, exploring the soil, tasting the last of the fall greens that made it through winter. I've never seen students use a mud kitchen and I wasn't sure what it would look like, but what I witnessed was the most incredible sight of kids being real kids.

They worked together to get soil for their cupcakes, shared tools and pans, and found spring weeds to decorate what they made together. The mud kitchen in the garden created a space for students to use their imagination and play in a way I've never seen before. The amount of story lines I overheard that they'd made up and the imaginary worlds they created in those 10 minutes in the mud kitchen was the best and most heartwarming experience.

This is all thanks to the years of hard work and engagement from Rick. It is clear that even without Mr. Rick there in the garden, the culture of inquiry and excitement in the garden continues to show up in all the students who engage with the space. The time spent building that mud kitchen and working with school staff to get students out in the garden playing how they are meant to play has fostered a true sense of ownership and love of the school garden amongst the Johnson students. It was clear in the voices I heard coming down the hill: "Who's that?" "Where is Mr. Rick?" "That's her, the new garden teacher." It was clear in the questions they asked as they arrived: "Where did the digging pit go?" "Are the strawberries still here?" And it was clear in the way they knew exactly what to do with their free exploration time. I already can't wait to be back in a few weeks.