Besides the obvious changes a new school year brings, Newark High School students will also notice a colorful and artistic visual addition to the northeastern corner of the school courtyard in September. It’s a garden adorned with 33 unique birdhouses, made during the last few months of the 2018-19 school year by students in Amy O’Connor’s Pottery and Advanced Pottery classes and Renee Bailey’s Mixed Media and Drawing and Painting 2 classes.

While brainstorming ideas for a collaborative project in the spring, O’Connor, Bailey and their students collectively came up with the idea of beautifying and bringing life to a corner in the largely empty, unused courtyard with the creation of a birdhouse garden.

The highly ambitious project was a labor of love that was completed in August with O’Connor and Bailey, some of their family members, NHS staff, students and alumni this summer carving out the garden space with a rototiller and shovels, adding new topsoil, installing the birdhouses, mulching the garden and adding some flowers and plants as a finishing touch.

The landscape has changed.
Bailey explained each student in her Drawing and Painting 2 class built their birdhouses using all reclaimed materials and acrylic paints and drew inspiration from the works of two-dimensional American artists from the 20th Century Realism Reinvented art movements; a two-dimensional American artist from the 20th Century Modernism art movement; and a two-dimensional American Street Artist from the 21st century.

"How the students combined all three of their artists after extensively researching each was up to them," she said. "They may have drawn inspiration from a particular art piece or the overall style of the artist. There weren’t any limits to their creativity or interpretation. One student even used reclaimed license plates as a roof because her artist used license plates as imagery.

"We spent a week after our research period going over how to break down work that is two-dimensional in order to make it three-dimensional," Bailey continued. "Where they could draw ideas from, how those ideas may look great on paper but may not work as construction begins. Most of these students had never worked like this. This was an advanced fine arts drawing and painting class that traditionally works only two-dimensionally. They were being asked to make a three-dimensional piece of art that not only had to be decorative, but functional outdoors. Even their post and post height had to be considered in their overall design. I was proud of how easily they adapted and problem solved throughout this process once they began construction. They fed off of each other as a group. That’s what you strive for in an art studio."

Students involved in this class included Gracie Ketcham, Felicity Hyde, Cameron McAllister, Alessio Muto, Damon Rogers, Deborah Szarek and Micah Utley-Powell.
Similarly, students in Bailey’s Mixed Media classes each created a birdhouse using reclaimed materials and acrylic paint. They drew inspiration from an endangered species and a modern American 20th-21st century artist. “If the student wanted, their American artist could be a three-dimensional artist. Mixed Media is an advanced fine arts course in which the students work two-dimensionally and three-dimensionally throughout the school year. Even though the class had worked three-dimensionally throughout the year, this would be the first time creating for a specific outdoors space with other classes’ works infused throughout,” Bailey explained. “How could they bring awareness to their species endangerment while beautifying the given space? They struggled in areas, much like the Drawing and Painting 2 class. But, like the DP2 class, they too fed off of each other for ideas during construction, took feedback from critiques and applied it even when it came to final presentations. They would walk into the pottery classes to see what they were doing so they had a framework of all that was going into this outdoor space. You could tell they were really thinking about overall end product.”

Mixed Media Students involved included: Liberty Faliveno, Shenna Harris, Lynzee Havert, Ashton Keene, Emma Perrone and Alisa Shepherd.
Students in O’Connor’s Pottery classes watched documentaries on architectural styles throughout history. Then they each drew a card with an unfamiliar architectural style on it that they needed to commit to researching and exploring as a means of stretching themselves beyond the familiar.

“We spent a great deal of time looking at various websites and online museum sources to find specific dates of their selected style, locations, architectural details and materials as well as images of buildings/constructions,” O’Connor explained. “Then students were then asked to take their findings and develop sketches of a birdhouse from various view points that would capture or embed their selected architectural style. After that students used different methods of working in clay — hand building to throwing clay on the wheel — and constructed their birdhouses, finalizing them with glazes and different glaze techniques, decorative details and/or embellishments.”

Pottery students involved included: Denisha Jones, Emma Frazer, Carson Jordan, Dillan Hernandez, Jaden Williams, Hannah Miller, Madeline Tulloch, Shaylyn Hixson, Kamryn Reyome, Olivia Daniels, Alyssa Gunkel, Kaylah Meadows, Brandon Holland and McKenna Kersten.
Similarly, O’Connor’s Advanced Pottery students created ceramic birdhouses, but they were able to choose their own architectural style and even choose to incorporate several styles into one if they desired to.

Advanced Pottery students involved were: Emily Spry, McKinley Miller, Emma Perrone, Jasmine VanWinkle, Ali Avery and Hannah Herman.

“What I found truly inspiring throughout this whole process that started in April and ended in August was that, all of the classes involved cheered each other on as they created and completed their pieces,” Bailey said. “Even my Drawing and Painting 1 students, who did not make birdhouses would check the progress of my classes and Mrs. O’Connor’s classes. They came out to help too when we would ask... even some alumni came in July. It truly was a whole community giving back. This garden will inspire all that see it on a day-to-day basis which is why we make art.”

“At first, when the Pottery students were told they would draw an architectural style out of a hat and that was their assigned style to work with and research, several first complained being pushed outside their comfort zone, knowing little to nothing about it, of course,” O’Connor recalled. “But with a little nudging and confidence building, and once they dug into the research, most found they really enjoyed their topic and found some really interesting things about the architecture and time period of the style. Students were very engaged in this particular project. So much so that many would come in to do more work on their birdhouse during their study halls, lunch periods and even after school. They loved the idea of creating a space in the courtyard to showcase their work and the idea of leaving a piece of themselves—a legacy. But also really liked the idea of beautifying the space, making it an aesthetically pleasing view versus an empty unused space.

“What I really like about the garden is how it brought so many different students together and hopefully, will continue to promote the idea of community and inspire future students to do something to benefit their school community/environment,” she said. “It exemplifies having pride in your school and the importance of working together and the amazing possibilities/outcomes that can happen when people work as a team. I’m very proud of the work students put into this project and I think it looks amazing. When you get out there in the space and look closely at each house and the intricate details each student added to their piece, it is really impressive and leaves you feeling hopeful and inspired. I hope as our faculty, staff and students look out from classrooms into the courtyard, the birdhouse garden makes them smile and makes their day a little brighter.”
NHS Principal Tom Roote gives the birdhouse garden project high marks.

“While a biology major at Cortland State I had the opportunity to take an ornithology course (study of birds),” he said. “A large part of the course work was to recognize birds by their vocalizations, which led us on many an adventure. When Mrs. Bailey approached me with the concept of celebrating our wildlife with an art project, I was quick to share my support as I saw the value in giving our students a birding adventure not dissimilar to mine. We are lucky to have an art department that is so focused on a community feel to all our spaces. I am looking forward to sharing this space with our students in the coming months.”

O’Connor and Bailey thanked everyone that had a hand in the project and appreciatively noted the donations of topsoil and mulch from Q’s Landscape Enterprises in Newark and the Village of Newark DPW. Plants and flowers were donated by Bailey, O’Connor and other NHS faculty and staff.

Thanks to Renee Bailey and Amy O’Connor and others for providing photos.