

Utica Observer Dispatch

OPINION

Down-to-earth ideas are good for us all

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Earth Day 2002 is still four days away. But young people will get a jump on things and learn some valuable lessons in protecting the environment today, thanks to a special day-long program at Utica's Children's Museum.

It's a worthwhile lesson for us all.

Earth Day < April 22 < was first observed in 1970, largely due to the efforts of then-U.S. Senator Gaylord Nelson. Nelson, a Democrat from Wisconsin who served in the Senate from 1963-81, was troubled by the fact that the environment was a non-issue in American politics, and actually sold the idea to President John F. Kennedy in 1962. But despite a conservation tour by Kennedy to pitch the idea, the seed did not sprout. It remained dormant until 1969, when Nelson borrowed a page from the anti-Vietnam War teach-ins, and took his message on the environment to college campuses.

Earth Day was observed a year later.

We've come a long way since. Through the years, the environment has become a key issue in Congress, and our own congressman, Sherwood Boehlert, R-New Hartford, has been a major advocate, primarily in the field of acid rain, which had previously received little, if any, attention. In 1990, the Clean Air Act included a Boehlert-sponsored amendment on acid rain.

Baby boomers < a growing percentage of the population < may recall more careless times, when sewage emptied into streams and lakes and town landfills were loaded with everything < including the kitchen sink. Stricter controls on development, updated water treatment and intensive community recycling programs have addressed those problems.

But the battle isn't won.

There are many issues that still need to be addressed < plant emissions, global warming, alternative energy, to name a few < if we are to nurture and preserve our earth for future generations. And while we need to be conscious of such things each day, Earth Day serves as an annual wake-up call and merits our attention.

Efforts like today's program at the Children's Museum help. It's sponsored largely by Kids Against Pollution, a multi-national organization of youths dedicated to educating the

public on environmental issues. The local group, directed by Christine Shahin-Wood, includes about 50 students from Utica's Kernan Elementary School and about 15 from Poland Central School.

Things get under way at 10 a.m. with a presentation by Model UN students on an upcoming world summit on sustainability in Johannesburg, South Africa. The summit's focus will be on an economy that doesn't just deplete, but replenishes itself. Also, a student exploration team from Hamilton College will present findings from recent explorations in Antarctica, where the collapse of the Larsen B Ice Shelf has been blamed on global warming, which has been linked to pollution.

The day-long program is designed for children.

But the lessons are for us all.