

Fighting the stigma against creepy crawlies

SEEDS educator leads programs to teach Durham youth about animals found in the garden.

By Parth Shah
Staff Writer

Spiders, salamanders, even cockroaches. Thaddeus Bennett has no problem reaching into a crate full of these creatures and holding one in his hand.

“Cockroaches have these little things on the back of their body called cerci that check for changes in temperature and pressure,” Bennett said as he picked a Madagascar hissing cockroach out of a plastic container filled with mulch and scattered pieces of sliced carrots. “When you walk near a door, before you even open it they can feel you coming.”

The Madagascar hissing cockroach is just one of a dozen different species of animals Bennett keeps housed on a pushcart filled with plastic cages at the SEEDS – South Eastern Efforts Developing Sustainable Spaces – warehouse. Bennett has been a youth educator with the organization since 2005. For the past 10 years, he has led a program called Animals of the Garden.

“It teaches kids about the value of creatures that most people are afraid of in the garden,” he said. “It teaches them about what these animals do and why they’re not as dangerous as people think. Lot of kids don’t even know, for example, what a salamander is.”

Bennett brings his pushcart filled with spiders, salamanders and cockroaches to work with the SEEDlings After School program and local elementary school classrooms.

“Thaddeus teaches us all about the different animals,” said 7-year-old Sender Martinez. The second-grader goes to SEEDS after school four days a week.

Bennett said the hands-on learning experience helped Martinez face his fears.



Thaddeus Bennett, a youth educator at SEEDS in downtown Durham, cradles a rose hair tarantula. Bennett teaches kids about animals and shows how they aren’t as dangerous as they seem. (Staff photo by Parth Shah)

“He’s our main animal holder,” Bennett said. “He picks up any animal we have here. When I started with him last spring, he was scared of everything. It’s really neat to see the kids grow and see what they’ve learned.”

Before arriving at SEEDS, Bennett worked for 15 years at the Museum of Life and Science in Durham.

“I was teaching kids about really important North Carolina animals,” he said. “The information excited the kids, and it excited me too because I was learning new things. Leaving the museum was one of the hardest things I’ve ever done.”

Bennett said his talents were needed elsewhere.

“The museum, a lot of times, reached really wealthy kids,” he said. “I wanted to come to a place where I could work with kids who didn’t have those same kinds of opportunities.”

Over the past 10 years, Bennett has worked to make resources accessible to everyone who comes through the front doors of SEEDS. For example, after Bennett met Latasha McMillan at a job fair, he made sure to find her a spot working at the organization.

“Mr. Thad is the reason I came to SEEDS,” McMillan said. “I can’t express how thankful I am for all that he’s done for me and so many other students that have come here.”

The 23-year-old has been with the organization for almost 10 years.

Bennett has been with SEEDS longer than any current employee. Though he has seen the program grow tremendously over the years, Bennett said there is still a lot of work to be done to improve recruitment.

“This is a very rare place,” he said. “There is so much happening here that a lot of people in the direct neighborhood don’t know about. I wish I could get the people who live here, right across the street, to get their kids involved.”

In addition to Animals of the Garden, Bennett leads a variety of afterschool and summer activities, including martial arts and dance classes.

Before working at the Museum of Life and Science, Bennett had a dance career. He said he thinks dancing has a lot in common with educating kids.

“Even though I know I can go into a class and do a pretty good job, I make sure the night before I rehearse. I’ll rehearse as if I had an audience in here.”

For Bennett, working with the kids at SEEDS beats any standing ovation.

“I’ve always wanted to work with kids and teach them about the things I know,” he said. “I get to do all this right here at SEEDS. Most days I come in here and I am really, really happy.”

SEEDS Office and Garden is located at 706 Gilbert St. and is open Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Saturday from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Visit <http://www.seedsnc.org/> for more information.