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Bush experience earns Sydney graduate a finalist place in national awards

A teacher, who incorporated Australian bush experiences into the program of an inner-city Sydney preschool, is a finalist in the 2014 HESTA Early Childhood Education and Care Awards.

Amy Barthet, of KU John J Carroll Preschool, is one of five finalists in the Outstanding Young Graduate category.

Ms Barthet has been recognised for creating a new learning opportunity for almost 40 preschool children.

Ms Barthet said the project involved a number of stages that included discussion and storytelling about the bush at the preschool.

Two groups of 20 children — many of whom had never been to the bush before — then undertook a two-kilometre walk in Garigal National Park and East Lindfield's Little Digger Track.

"Building on the children's experiences and imagination, we conducted an 'on-site' exploration of camping and the bush. The children were introduced to some of the sights, sounds and smells of the bush within the preschool setting," Ms Barthet explained.

"Preparation for a bush walk involved discussions and activities on the importance of offering and receiving help, bush safety, nutrition, the making and use of maps and learning about the traditional owners of the land.

"We also tested the children's physical limitations and planned bad-weather contingencies."

Ms Barthet said she wanted the children to have an opportunity to connect with nature and to have a sensory experience in an environment very different to their inner-city lives.

Most importantly, she wanted the children to have the opportunity to engage in supported risk-taking challenges and test their physical capabilities.

"As we began to prepare for our outing, many of the children initially felt nervous and fragile, thinking they could not go on a real bush walk," Ms Barthet said.

"However, once they were on the walk, they proved themselves to be capable, strong and adventurous.

"Other teachers — and those from other centres — are now taking children into the community more regularly, providing meaningful and rewarding experiences for all involved."

Ms Barthet and other interstate finalists will be flown to Melbourne to attend an awards dinner, where the winners will be announced during the Early Childhood Australia National Conference on Saturday 6 September 2014.

A \$30,000 prize pool will be shared among the winners, generously provided by long-term HESTA awards supporter ME Bank.

The winner of the Outstanding Young Graduate Award will receive a \$10,000 development grant. The Excellence in Building Inclusion, and Advancing Pedagogy and Practice Award winners will each receive \$10,000 to further implement their program or initiative.

HESTA is the super fund for health and community services, with more than 785,000 members and \$28 billion in assets. More people in health and community services choose HESTA for their super.

Visit hestaawards.com.au for tickets for the awards dinner or to learn more about the awards.

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