Students from five Queens public middle schools are making their neighborhoods cleaner this summer through a federally funded St. John’s University initiative that transforms the youngsters into leaders who serve their communities by protecting the environment.

St. John’s won a competitive, $90,000 “Learn and Serve America” grant to create the program as part of a federal effort that helps young Americans build academic and leadership skills through service-learning. Focusing on education and service, St. John’s two-month program guides students in developing and executing their own sustainability projects.

The students turned the Queens campus into a giant classroom for two days in July. Taught and mentored by St. John’s students and professors, specially trained middle-school teachers and environmental experts, the children studied recycling, nutrition, leadership and service. They also learned about composting at the campus “organic garden.”

“These young men and women are absolutely wonderful — highly motivated and concerned about the environment,” said Richard Sinatra, Ph.D., Professor and Associate Dean of Academic Affairs in The School of Education. Dr. Sinatra developed the program through St. John’s Vincentian Institute for Social Action (VISA). His Co-Director is Michael Donhost, Ed.D., Assistant Professor in The School of Education.

Dr. Sinatra also chairs VISA’s Faculty Research Consortium. The School of Education works closely with VISA on such efforts as CampUs, After-School All-Stars and other programs for urban children. St. John’s created VISA to more visibly embed its Catholic, Vincentian mission into its students’ education. VISA unites new and ongoing programs that empower students and professors to combat global poverty and injustice through teaching, research and service.
Impressed by St. John’s program, Jennifer Brady, an analyst at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), came from Washington, D.C., to talk to the children about ways to measure the energy-saving impact of recycling. “This is a wonderful program,” she said. “Students in these grades usually don’t cover this range of topics.”

Inspired by their two days at the Queens campus, the children are spending the rest of their summer developing their own service projects at their respective middle schools — IS 145, MS 216, IS 126, JHS 217 and IS 204. They come back to St. John’s on August 27 to deliver presentations about their experiences.

The program also has been a learning opportunity for St. John’s students, who served as paid staff and volunteers. Biology majors Eleni Agresti ‘11C, Zaid Rana ‘11C and Joanna Shields ‘11C delivered a presentation on recycling. Katie McVeay ‘12CPS, a film major from Missouri, created a movie on healthful shopping. Erin Chalmers ‘11Ed was an instructor in the organic garden. “This has allowed us to share our passion for nature with a younger generation,” said biology major Andrew Hopkins ‘10C. “It was St. John’s that brought us together.”