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Cotati Creek Critters' Blaker named Citizen of Year

By Nicolas Grizzle
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Ten years after it began, the Cotati Creek Critters has been recognized as an integral part of Cotati.

Jenny Blaker, outreach coordinator for the Critters, was named Cotati Citizen of the Year at the Cotati Chamber's 50th annual awards dinner Saturday night at the Ray Miller Community Center. Blaker was quick to thank the "hundreds of volunteers" that make the Critters successful. "I certainly feel it was for the whole group," she said of the award.

When she asks volunteers how they heard of the group, the answers are often vague. The fact that people can't pinpoint where they heard of the Critters is an example that Blaker is doing her job well, spreading the word through many different channels.

The nonprofit Critters organization took off in 2005 with a water resources grant from the State of California. That and a couple other grants have allowed Blaker and Wade Belew to work full time on planting native shrubs, hedges and other plants which will help solidify the creek banks and prevent flooding.

Not only do they work on the immediate effects, but the Critters have started educational programs with local elementary schools to spread the importance of nature for future generations.

"It's established now, it's not just a flash in the pan," said Blaker in an eloquent English accent.

Originally from rural England, Blaker moved to Cotati in 1996. Her favorite aspect of the city, she says, is the proximity to the Laguna de Santa Rosa, the small-town atmosphere and the people. "The people are very warm, open and accepting," she said.

The Citizen of the Year award is based on a points system which includes years of service to the city and things they've done to improve the quality of life. "It's not political," says Chamber Director Suzanne Whipple.

Named Business of the Year was Petaluma's Lagunitas Brewing Company. Cotati citizen Jeremy Marshall, head brewer at Lagunitas, was on hand to accept the award. He said the company used to be entirely run by one person, owner Tony Magee, and is expanding soon to become an automated facility which will brew about 200 kegs per day. Marshall invited the public to come for a tour any weekday at 3 p.m. to witness the expansion. Call Lagunitas at 769-4495 for more information.

Magee's first customer was Gerard Giudice of Sally Tomatoes. Of course, back in 1993 Gerard was running the McGinnis Park Golf Center's restaurant. According to Gerard, Magee walked in and said "I'll give you this keg free if you buy another one," and, after Gerard accepted, Magee went to his truck and rolled in another keg of the garage-brewed beer.

When Gerard was catering this year's Cotati Oktoberfest, he certainly needed more than one keg. The festival was "beyond what everyone thought," said Marshall, but the microbrewery came through and brought more beer - twice - to satisfy the large crowd.

Cotati Corner was named Ambassador of the Year by the Chamber, as selected by the Board of Directors.

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