

The Community VOICE

Rohnert Park, Cotati, & Penngrove

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The change starts here
Cotati's Jenny Blaker saving the environment one creek at a time
By Heidi Bailey
Friday, March 27, 2009 2:13 AM CDT

March is recognized as the National Women in History month. This week, Jenny Blaker is acknowledged for her vision and making an impact on the environment through her determination and hard work in growing Cotati Creek Critters, cleaning up and restoring Laguna de Santa Rosa. She was honored for her work last Saturday at the National Women in History Project of Santa Rosa at the Wells Fargo Center.

"The local creeks are our connection to water. They're directly related to our water quality and wildlife habitat. Taking care of our local creeks is something we all can do and need to do to take care of the environment around us," said Cotatian Jenny Blaker, outreach coordinator for Cotati Creek Critters and one of the original founders of the group.

What started out in 1998 as a small group of friends cleaning up an area of creek in L section, has now grown to a regular twice a month event and has had over 2,000 volunteers lending a helping hand to rejuvenate and clean up the Santa Rosa de Laguna channel.

Blaker said her interest stemmed from looking at the creek from out her back door and her obvious passion has evolved into something she never dreamed could be so big.

She says Cotati Creek Critters was originally just an informal nickname for the small group that worked along sections of Cotati's creeks in general, starting out her and her neighbor's back door on Liman Way. Back then it was Blaker, Linda Christopher and Maria Alvarez who began the Critters. They had no funds and used only their own garden tools to plant.

At the time, the city had finished putting in the bike path and a bike bridge over the channel. Blaker said, "In the process of doing that, everything was torn up and there was no vegetation left so Maria, who is a plant biologist interested in native plants, approached the city and asked if we could plant some native trees and shrubs back there."

With the city and the water agency's permission, they began planting once a month. Gradually their group grew and they began to work in other areas of Cotati as well.

In 2003, Blaker and another who had joined the group, Wade Belew, took a class at the Santa Rosa JC and one of the class projects was writing a baseline assessment and feasibility study of the three miles of the Laguna channel that goes through Cotati.

"What we found was there had been extensive studies of the Laguna de Santa Rosa in other areas but we couldn't find anything written about this area." Obtaining as many maps they could get they did a history of the area, vegetation surveys and cross-sections of the creeks.

This proved to be useful in more ways than one as in 2005, they used it as a basis to obtain a grant from the California Department of Resources and Urban Stream Restoration. This \$169,000 grant gave them the funding to involve the local community in planting along the Laguna and it sustained them through 2008. They've since received a few more grants catapulting the Critters to new heights.

Now they work along the main channel of the Laguna de Santa Rosa which is a tributary to the Laguna and joins it closer to downtown Cotati near Marsh Way.

"It's really confusing because a lot of people think that the area where we work is Cotati Creek but it isn't - it's the upper reach or Cotati reach of the Laguna de Santa Rosa," Blaker said.

So far, they've completed one mile of the channel, planting trees and shrubs and currently they're planting under story brush to stabilize the banks, help keep the water clean and sustain habitat. "Right now we're consolidating what we've already done and we'll be slowly working our way up the creek in this fashion."

Blaker's part as outreach coordinator focuses on spreading the word and getting the community involved.

She's recruited boy scout troops, school groups, groups from the JC and SSU, churches, and synagogues. Blaker has rounded up groups as big as 70 at a time, providing special restoration days for these groups. At the two monthly Stewardship days, she's enlisted anywhere from 12 to 30 volunteers just by spreading the word.

She attributes the success to the 2005 grant they received and says it allowed them to do more public outreach. Once they received the grant, the city then stepped up and provided an in-kind donation of the Well Lot No. 2 space where they are able to store their plants, tools and have water and electrical hook-ups.

Soft-spoken and humble when it comes to her part in the whole thing, she says she cares so much because she has become so conscious of how rapidly wildlife habitat and natural open spaces are being "swallowed up" by enormous development pressures.

"We all depend on water and our local creeks are directly related to our water quality. A lot of people want to do something to help but don't know where to begin." Her guiding principal? "Start from where you are."

Throwing trash in the creeks, particularly plastic, affects everyone. It drifts down stream, filters into the Russian River and ultimately goes out into the ocean. "There is a huge problem with plastic in the ocean. Everything we do has an impact on local creeks, the problem starts here."

In addition to spreading the word out about Stewardship days and organizing special groups, she also set ups community education programs with guest speakers to help educate the public on how they can make a difference in their community and the environment.

For a list of upcoming Cotati Creek Critter events, see the Home, Garden, Food and Farm section in this issue.

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