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Still taking them to school

Powell's passionate about environment education

By Jenny Blaker June 23, 2011 11:51 am

Gail Powell moved to Cotati in 2004. Right behind her house was the Laguna Channel. She had heard of the Laguna de Santa Rosa but didn't know much about it or its significance and had no idea she was living close to the headwaters area.

She became aware of Cotati Creek Critters and began to volunteer on Creek Stewardship Days and go to some of the educational events. The more she learned about the local wildlife and ecology, water and watersheds, the more she began to appreciate the Laguna and the more she wanted to know.

Gail drove school buses for 15 years, taking children to and from schools in the west county. She retired last year. Having met Gail through Cotati Creek Critters, I knew of her love of nature, her innate sense of curiosity, and her love of children.

I encouraged her to apply for the Laguna Foundation's docent training program, and was thrilled when she signed up for the program earlier this year, and even more so when, at the end of it, she told me that she had enjoyed every minute of it.

"Thanks to Jenny, for encouraging me to go," said Gail. She went along to an initial informational meeting and, as she walked through the door "I knew instantly that I was in the right place."

At the first class, she was overwhelmed by the stack of informational materials in the huge, thick ring binder every docent was given, and horrified to learn there would be a test at the end of the course, as she has spent most of her life avoiding tests. Not to give anything away, but "in the end, the test was one of the most fun parts of the whole experience."

The course balances classroom presentations and field trips. For example, there was a talk about birds, then a field trip to explore and watch birds in various places in the Laguna. The trip to the water treatment facility on Llano Road was an eye-opener.

The more Gail learned, the more she recognized the importance of taking care of water at every level, through all the ditches, creeks, streams and tributaries all over the watershed that connect and flow together into the Laguna and then the Russian River. The most emotional day, she said, was the day spent with Native Americans, who shared their knowledge and experiences of what life had been like for their ancestors, gathering plants, respecting and working with the land.

Having enjoyed working with children as a bus driver, Gail loved working with children in this situation. Much of the teaching is done through games, easy games that teach, and the children are willing to learn because of the way the material is presented.

"What do you see?" the children are asked, as they are encouraged to be observant of their environment, and to think for themselves. Gail enjoys their responsiveness, that they are open, excited, eager to learn, and really interested. She hopes to help instill in them a respect for nature, and for the ecology of all the creeks and waterways of the Laguna watershed.

Having completed the training, Gail, like the other docents, is now obligated for the next two years to go into classrooms and take children on field trips as part of the Laguna Foundation's "Learning Laguna" schools program. She is looking forward to this obligation, and to helping teach the children the importance of taking care of the Laguna.

What would she say to other neighbors if she could? "Learn about the Laguna," she said. "Take every opportunity you can with Cotati Creek Critters or the Laguna Foundation, to learn and understand more about this amazing treasure that's all around us, where we live."

Jenny Blaker is the outreach coordinator for Cotati Creek Critters. Gail Powell lives next to the Laguna de Santa Rosa Channel in Cotati.



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