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Laguna de Santa Rosa docent program brings participants closer to nature

By Patricia Roth, Sonoma Times West

The Laguna de Santa Rosa has always been a part of Jeanette Doyel's life, but it wasn't until she became a docent at age 65 that she started to spend time there - so much time that her three grown daughters said that they worried about her "out there in the swamp."

Windsor resident Doyel swept her daughters' concerns to the side, laughing because she recollected telling them about looking at bugs under the full moon in the dark. However, she admitted that since she's become a docent, "it seems like I can't go through a day without saying 'the Laguna' to somebody."

Doyel was born and raised on a ranch in Forestville and attended Analy High School (before El Molino High opened). She has lived in Windsor for eight years. About a year ago, she signed on to become a docent for the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation, the nonprofit organization that is working to restore and preserve the 250-square-mile watershed, described on its Web site as "a unique ecological system that is comprised of a mosaic of open water, wetland, riparian forest, oak woodland, grassland vernal pools" that covers more than 20,000 acres and lies between Sebastopol and western Santa Rosa, south to Cotati, and north to the Russian River.

Fascinated with the Laguna, Doyel attended an orientation meeting to find out what was required and how the docent training program was structured. She then agreed to make a two-year, 40-hour commitment to the program.

"I was curious and I wanted to learn more. It has been so interesting to learn the history of the Laguna and how important it is," she said. "It's been such a surprise to see how much I've been learning. There's so much enthusiasm in the community toward restoring the Laguna. We're trying to get more docents to go into schools so we can offer more programs."

This year, the Laguna is looking for docents who want to turn schoolchildren in the second through fifth grades on to the wonders of the Laguna, while teaching them about the value of wetlands and watershed science.

A docent training orientation meeting will be held on Monday, Feb. 6 from 7 to 9 p.m. at Central Santa Rosa Library Forum Room located at 3rd and E streets. Those who are interested can just show up at the meeting or call the Laguna's Education Coordinator Mary Abbott, 527-9277 ext. 2, or email her at mary@lagunafoundation.org.

Docent training classes begin on March 13 and run 10 weeks until the end of May. They will be taught by local experts in biology, hydrology, natural history and environmental education. A \$125 fee is asked to cover the costs of materials.

Docents go into classrooms and give students a slide show and introduce them to the different environments of the Laguna, including its inhabitants. Then they set up four activity stations - “hands-on, fun stuff,” Abbott said.

Students also learn about the characteristics and function of wetlands, how to identify wildlife in the Laguna and how and why migration occurs, Abbot said.

After the classroom activities are finished, students “get to go out in the field and they cannot wait to go,” she said. “One year ago they got to see a den of coyote pups” and another time they saw a “nest of great-horned owls in the trees and the babies being fed.

“For kids who don't get out in nature, this is really powerful stuff.”

Learning to be a docent was challenging, Doyel said. But the experience has given her more than she could have imagined.

“I'm glad I have that connection with nature,” she said. “When I'm out there, I just come alive. The Laguna is magic. Sunrise or sunset, every time and every place that I go, it's peaceful and it's quiet. You don't have to go very far to get away from everything.”

