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High school teacher leads students to save creek

Shelah Moody, Chronicle Staff Writer
Sunday, July 20, 2008

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Tom Furrer's father taught him how to fish when he was 6 years old and instilled in him a reverence for the natural world.

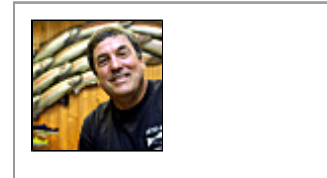
Furrer is a wildlife biology instructor at Casa Grande High School in Petaluma and founder and director of the United Anglers Conservation Fish Hatchery - the only high school-based fully licensed fish hatchery in the United States - and the Adobe Creek Restoration Project.

The restoration project began with a question from a student at Casa Grande in 1982.

"We were covering endangered species and discussing what was happening and the causes and the losses," said Furrer. "I had a student who raised his hand and said, 'Mr. Furrer, no disrespect, but everything you're telling us is absolutely stupid. Why are we losing these things at such a rapid rate, things that we all love? What can we do?'"

"I honestly didn't have an answer, and it was one of those instances when I was literally saved by the bell. After he said that, I pondered for just a second, and the kids had to go to their next class. It was a Friday, and that bothered me all day on Saturday. I was a young teacher and I didn't know how I was going to answer the question because I knew it would come up on Monday."

Walking the creek



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To clear his mind, Furrer walked to Adobe Creek, across the street from Casa Grande. The creek was once the only water source for the city of Petaluma, which was founded in 1854. But by the 1980s, this part of Adobe Creek was dry and filled with debris.

Visit [American Institute for Public Service](#) for more information.

Furrer walked up the creek bed, where he met Charlie Malnati, who owned property nearby. "Charlie had a little pool of water in his backyard, and it had tiny fish in it," said Furrer. "He said, 'If you are really concerned about the environment, help me save these little fish.'

"The pool of water was 6 feet around and 6 inches deep. There was no other water around. There were tiny steelhead trout in the pool. I said, 'Charlie, these are (endangered) steelhead trout!' He told me he had been trying to save them for years."

Furrer helped Malnati move the fish to a safer place upstream. He walked back to his classroom knowing that he had the answer to the student's question.

"I told the kids, if they were really concerned about the environment, to follow me," said Furrer. "I used the term 'rebuild' because back in the early '80s, restore wasn't a commonly used term. I told them that we were going to rebuild Adobe Creek."

In 1983, Furrer and his students formed the United Anglers of Casa Grande High School, and adopted Adobe Creek.

"Here we are 25 years later, and all 7 miles of the creek have been completely restored," said Furrer. "We've built a huge conservation fish hatchery on campus." The kids have been recognized by the federal government for helping save the trout from extinction.

Furrer's students took willow cuttings from around Adobe Creek and grew them into trees in an abandoned greenhouse on campus. When the state condemned the greenhouse because it wasn't up to earthquake code, they rebuilt it. The group also persuaded the city to divert water back into the creek.

"Once that was done, then all of the trees that we'd been planting were regrowing. In the meantime, we were working in the creek, pulling the litter out, planting the trees, which takes a long time to do.

"In the meantime, it became apparent that the natural fish were responding so well to the restoration that we didn't need to artificially propagate the fish and put them in the creek. What we ended up with was a completely restored Adobe Creek, a viable fish run, and now we use the facility to help the salmon, which are really in trouble in California. We are raising about 50,000 of those a year, and that adult salmon collect starts for us in October and continues in December. Our fish are now in pens in the San Francisco Bay and Tiburon. The kids are taking care of them on a daily basis."

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20 accepted a year

Furrer accepts 20 students a year into the United Anglers program; it is open to all Casa Grande students. Students begin preparing for the program in fifth and sixth grades so that they are well trained by the time they reach high school.

Furrer takes pride in the fact that the United Anglers have produced environmental lawyers, firefighters, science teachers and a renowned stem cell scientist, Julie Lambert, who works at the Buck Institute in Novato. One of Furrer's former students, Anna Kastner, runs the salmon hatchery near the Feather River, the largest in California.

The United Anglers have been mentioned in school textbooks in Japan and visited by distinguished scientists such as Jane Goodall, who has touted the program in her lectures around the world.

One of Furrer's goals is to expand the United Anglers program to other schools. Another is to turn his story into a book, and eventually a movie, at the suggestion of Goodall. He would also like representatives from the Department of Education and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to visit the facility.

"The best thing that we try and do is not only show what we've done, but convince them that they can do it, too," said Furrer. "That concept has been spreading like wildfire all over the world."

For information, visit [www. uacg.org](http://www.uacg.org).

Each week, The Chronicle features a Bay Area resident who has won a Jefferson Award for making a difference in his or her community. The awards are administered by the American Institute for Public Service, a national foundation that honors community service. Bay Area residents profiled in The Chronicle are also featured on CBS5-TV and KCBS-AM, which are Jefferson Award media partners, along with The Chronicle.

E-mail Shelah Moody at smoody@sfchronicle.com.

This article appeared on page F - 2 of the San Francisco Chronicle



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