

Published October 3rd, 2018

An asset for 40 years at Wagner Ranch Nature Area

By Sora O'Doherty



Teacher and volunteer Toris Jaeger works with students Jonah Imberg and Ryan Stemmler at the Wagner Ranch Nature Area in Orinda. Photo Sora O'Doherty

Moreover, subjects were taught separately and she wanted to connect things, to make them meaningful. By 1976, Jaeger decided to get out of classroom.

Jaeger found a master's program at Cal State Hayward, and signed up for her master's in environmental education. In 1978, she heard of a job opening at the Wagner Ranch Nature Area in Orinda. The rest, as they say, is history.

Her goal is to keep the curriculum standards-based, she says. "The core curriculum is trying to accomplish what we've been doing for 40 years: more hands-on teaching of the history of the cultures and their contribution to California history." She teaches children about the plants and animals, her curriculum evolves every year, and she personally tries to stay current.

The nature area currently operates with a staff of four people, in addition to Jaeger, who teaches every day. The other staff share days. The staff changes, she says. The young ones need to find a full-time job. The ones who stay longer are usually retired or have the knowledge and experience and don't need the money. The Friends of the Wagner Ranch have paid the staff a stipend since 2009 and money raised at the Friends' Olive Festival pays Jaeger and the staff. Jaeger says she is 75 percent volunteer, 25 percent paid. But now the school board is looking at funding the programs again.

If the two bond measures pass next November, plans for the nature area include building a visitor center, restrooms, and other facilities. Until 2009 the Educational Foundation of Orinda funded the staff; after the position was eliminated, the Friends pay the stipend and the parents donate money for supplies.

"I found my niche, and I'm so glad," Jaeger says. "I want to open the students up to nature and make them feel a part of it. California is part of their history, Orinda, its flora and fauna." She talked about overhearing students arriving at the Nature Area, not knowing that she could hear them, saying, "I love this place. I wish we could be here every day. It's OK to make mistakes here, we can get dirty."

The dinner in Jaeger's honor was organized by Miriam Storch, a board member of the Friends of the Nature Area and a former student of Jaeger's. All of Jaeger's siblings except one came to the dinner, including her four sisters and one of her two brothers. Other attendees included other former students, and Lisa Siegrist, a direct descendent of the Wagners, who came in from Vermont; Jaeger promised her a hike in the nature area.

The annual Olive Festival, sponsored by Village Associates Real Estate, is one of the few times that the Nature Area is open to the public. Admission is free, and the event takes place from 11:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at 350 Camino Pablo, Orinda (adjacent to Wagner Ranch Elementary School).

There will be tours of the historic Wagner Ranch Nature Area, homesite of Contra Costa County's first surveyor general, Theodore Wagner, and opportunities to picnic amidst our county's oldest-producing olive grove. Five olive oil vendors will be doing tastings, and there will also be arts and crafts, live music, pond and garden activities, and more. For information, visit www.fwrna.org.

Sometimes in the midst of life, we need to say to someone, "Wow. You are doing a fantastic job!" Not when they leave or retire, but right in the middle of their career. Thus, Toris Jaeger was honored at a dinner on Sept. 29 in the Orinda Community Center celebrating her 40 years of service to the Orinda community as a teacher and volunteer at the Wagner Ranch Nature Area, where she'll be taking part in the ninth annual Olive Festival on Sunday, Oct. 14. More than 10,000 Orinda children have experienced the hands-on environmental education and social studies programs led by Jaeger since 1978 - and she doesn't plan on stopping any time soon.

Teaching wasn't Jaeger's first career choice. She thought maybe she'd be an anthropologist, an archeologist or a veterinarian. But she wound up taking a teaching credential in Kentucky, where she went into teaching K through 8 in Leitchfield. Later she moved to Missouri, then to Minnesota, finally moving to California in 1972, where she continued to teach for four years.

Jaeger loved teaching, but she didn't enjoy being inside.

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