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Published May 13th, 2009

Public Forum

The Orinda Union School Board has decided to cut the District Naturalist Position for the 2009-2010 schoolyear; this is my response:

In Aug. of 1978, I had been a classroom teacher for 13 years when I came to Orinda to interview for the Naturalist position at the Wagner Ranch Nature Area. Warren Arnold was the curriculum coordinator and the creator of Animal Camp, Native Studies Program, Rancho Days, Pioneer Days and Sixth Grade Camp. First Thanksgiving was a program created by Sue Graf and Marty De Jonge. I was selected for the position. This was 30 years ago; I am now 65, but I am physically fit and not ready to retire!

Let me share with you what teaching children in the Nature Area has meant to me. There have been so many incredible experiences that have taken place over the years. It has been about sharing an incredible place called the Wagner Ranch Nature Area with over 10,000 students that have experienced each and every inch of the place with me. I am now teaching the children of students that I taught 30 years ago.

The Nature Area has been the launching pad for direct experience with the Natural World. Recent research studies reveal that experiences in outdoor education programs improve students' performance in science and retention of science concepts. Six to ten weeks after their outdoor experiences, the students showed gains in cooperation and conflict resolution. The participation also helped the students to make larger gains in environmental behaviors.

But we also know that the impacts of studying outside the classroom in natural areas run very deep. Many former students, who are now adults, have stepped forward to share how they benefited from the Nature Area programs. Their exposure to nature was a magical transformation that has lasted a life time. This appreciation of nature is the first step on the journey to a better understanding of our world. Our students need these lessons more than ever today. My thirty years of teaching has shown me that Nature is the best and first teacher and the lessons learned will never be forgotten.

The Nature Area is a living laboratory for students to learn the lessons that natural ecosystems have to teach about life in all its forms. It has meant connecting to the trees--the Wagners' Redwood is a focal point for students to join hands and make a circle around. The connection is with the tree and each other. The mighty Oaks, some 200 years old, one 400 years old are beloved by the students. The refrigerator tree (Madrone) is the one that each generation tells the

other about and all must meet. The pond has provided much excitement for discovery of the animals that inhabit it. The Red Legged Frog is revered and protected by each and every student that witnesses its presence.

The creeks are also places of discovery of Nature and provide students with challenges of strength, courage and self esteem. The discovery that one day the Wagner Ranch Creek has no water and then the next day is rushing with water brings joyful responses of "amazing, awesome". Students learn to love creeks and protect them from pollution.

The garden and greenhouse have created much enthusiasm for growing and eating fresh produce. Activities in the garden and greenhouse have created generations of students that recycle, mulch, and compost. Many Native plants have been grown and planted throughout the WRNA and the community. Many fruit trees have been planted for the benefit of all. Students grow plants to attract wildlife to the garden such as bees and birds.

Programs like Native Studies, Rancho Days, First Thanksgiving and Pioneer Days give students opportunities to make their way around an outdoor kitchen preparing and sharing foods of the cultures studied. They trace the influence and contributions of these cultures by studying effects on the landscape and investigating the artifacts that are found on the site. The Wagner Family history brings the study alive for the students, and the pride they take in this experience is inspiring.

In conclusion, I would like to quote a student who when asked what she had learned from the plant hike responded, "How soothing nature can be!" It is about listening, smelling, touching tasting, seeing and sensing the Natural world. Every child should have the opportunity to: discover California's past, splash in the water, explore nature, follow a trail, and celebrate their heritage. The WRNA is the perfect place for these experiences.

It is my hope that you will change your mind and also have a change of heart and listen to all who have come forward with their passions and financial support for the Environmental Education programs at the WRNA. Listen to the students! Like Marjorie Saunders who celebrated her 100 birthday on May 9th and has spent 60 years of her life living the belief, "When you believe in something, you have to do what you think is best" I believe, I have the ability to sustain what we have now and with the help of all of like passion make it continue into the future. The students want me to stay at the WRNA to keep the flame burning. The Wagner Ranch Nature Area programs have become a part of me and me a part of them.

Toris Jaeger, District Naturalist

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