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A TASTE OF LIFE IN NEW MEXICO

NOVEMBER
2019

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Desert Montessori School

young stewards

story by
CULLEN CURTISS

of the River

“It was Heart Work,” writes teacher Melia Lewis. Not only has every other educator interviewed shared this sentiment, but I, too, felt this way after picking up trash and doing restoration in the Santa Fe River on behalf of the Santa Fe Watershed Association’s (SFWA) Adopt-a-River program. SFWA’s mission is “to protect and restore the health and vibrancy of the Santa Fe River and its watershed for the benefit of people and the environment.”

For six years as Desert Montessori School’s steward team leader, Lewis took monthly trips with her students to their reach of river (between St. Francis Drive and the bridge). She says her first priority was to get kids outside and immerse them in a larger world perspective.

“One day, we found a teddy bear face down on the bank, muddy and mangled from the last flash flood. Knowing that a child—just like them—lost something precious, and how difficult that must be, shocked my kids into an awareness of social issues,” Lewis says. Perhaps a watershed moment in the life of a Kindergartener?

How did the community begin to think differently about the Santa Fe watershed?

Founder of the SFWA, hydrologist Paige Grant, says, “My board always told me, ‘You’ve got to give people something to fall in love with and then you can teach them about the watershed.’”

Grant grew to truly appreciate her board’s refrain in her seven years as SFWA’s executive director, during which she launched the organization’s Adopt-the-River program in 2003, an outreach initiative designed to encourage volunteer groups to work in the river, “to keep their stretch free of trash and graffiti and lined with native vegetation,” reads SFWA’s website, so that “...they become familiar with its problems and its potential, and help to advocate for its restoration.”

Recounting how the schools became engaged, Grant describes walking in the same reach as the DMS students, picking up Burger King trash near the Gonzales Community School. “With my bag full of wrappers, I asked to meet with the principal and introduced the idea of inviting schools nearest the river to participate in a river corridor protection project.”

Who’s working in our watershed today?

Now eight schools and 15 organizations steward six miles of river, separated into 40 areas of concentration or reaches beginning around Upper Cerro Gordo Road to just below the Siler Road bridge (plus a few reaches in the County). You’ve likely seen the signs along the river, designating not only the steward, but also the sponsor, whose contribution is an annual \$1,000–\$1,500. Launched in 2015, the companion Adopt-an-Arroyo program covers 80 miles of Santa Fe arroyos. In just four years, this program has engaged a dozen teams, four of which are schools. Each Adopt steward is contracted to visit their respective reach at least five times a year, report findings and be involved with at least two SFWA community clean-up events.



Keely Jackson - Kenmore



Gabby Beans

SFPS students examining stonefly larvae during a My Water My Watershed field trip



Santa Fe High School NJROTC students

These visible programs support the stewardship component of SFWA's mission, which is the piece Stuart Pendleton, a former 6th grade teacher at Rio Grande School and 10-year team leader with Adopt was looking for. "I spent years searching for a way to create a program where we could model stewardship and work with students at the river," Pendleton says. "Out of the blue came SFWA. They were a dream to work with and, hopefully, we planted the seeds of environmental stewardship and service in hundreds of young people."

Pendleton's is a noble hope, and he's in good company with fellow Adopt team leaders, including Santa Fe Waldorf School's Kathleen Taylor, who says, "I hope my students create a habit of volunteering in the community and feel some collective responsibility for the place they live." For others, the Adopt program offers a direct expression of their school's mission.

Santa Fe Indian School science teacher Katherine Sallah says, "I think we reinforce our core value of giving back, which is a focus at our school and in their Native communities."

For Melissa Miller and Phoebe Walendziak of Desert Montessori School, the work aligns with their school's Pledge to the Earth, which reads:

I pledge allegiance to the earth
and to all life that it nourishes—
all growing things, all species of animals
and all races of people.

I promise to protect all life on our planet,
to live in harmony with nature
and to share our resources justly,
so that all people can live with dignity
in good health and in peace.

What are the Watershed Association's hopes?

SFWA Volunteer Coordinator Keely Jackson-Kennemore is delighted by these declarations of love and commitment. "It's a learning experience for the students. They do not feel ownership of anything yet. It's a good way to start to understand how people live, how to take care of the



Former board member Tom Noble and volunteer Erin building a tree well.

environment. They hear a lot of talk about it, but if they are not directly involved, how are they going to really learn?"

SFWA Executive Director Andy Otto echoes and deepens Jackson-Kennemore's train of thought: "People cannot appreciate the river until they get down into it, and once they get down into it, they can appreciate it and be advocates for it. And so that ownership is the notion that others may own the water, but we own the river."

Getting down into the river is to really learn and appreciate it, and the student volunteers can have both beautiful and viscerally uncomfortable experiences, discovering an orphaned teddy bear not the least among them. After all, they are picking up trash in the Santa Fe River, which runs through a populated city that faces arguable challenges. Of the trash, Jackson-Kennemore says, it's "anthropological and archeological." And the students who are carefully freeing the river of it likely wonder what, why, when, who? And then maybe, how can we help?

What happens when one falls in love with the river?

Post river/arroyo visit, the steward team leader reports to the SFWA the number of volunteers, trash bags and working hours, and Jackson-Kennemore sends a monthly report to the City. For the month of September alone, Adopt steward team leaders reported a collective 202 volunteer hours, and 236 bags of debris. For fiscal year 2018–19, SFWA reported 1,022 volunteers working 1,697 hours, picking up 1,487 bags of debris. But as Jackson-Kennemore says, "It's not just clean up once. Recently, in 650 feet, two different schools reported pulling out 44 bags in two and a half hours around the St. Francis intersection." She admits she's amazed at times by the reports.

young stewards of the River

When Santa Fe Prep students with their Teen Action Program (TAP) deemed their Upper Canyon Road reach in good shape for the time being, they moved to their ascribed Arroyo Mascaras near the DeVargas Center. Olga Herrera, three-year steward team leader, shakes her head and says, “One day, we found 12 syringes. Every week, it’s two, three, four bags of trash.”

When I met up with those TAP students, they were digging basins around 10 of the 144 newly planted cottonwood trees in an unadopted reach between Frenchy’s Field and the Siler Road bridge, having requested something different of Jackson-Kennemore—a breather from the intensity of stories found in the trash perhaps. Their next planned outing was a coordinated effort with the City and others to deliver water to many of those recesses in order to give the trees a good soaking during this dry interim time.

On the way back to the school by bus, Herrera engages the students in a dialogue and, as with most steward team leaders, requires a written reflection at the end of their sessions. This is where Jackson-Kennemore and Otto’s hopes for a feeling of ownership can really take root.

A case in point is Victoria Vargas, student president of The Academy for the Technology and the Classics National Honor Society, who writes, “Cleaning up our adopted part of the river is an amazing opportunity for students, like myself, to do good in the community.... I personally have seen a change in our members of National Honor Society after cleaning up the river, and we have fun doing it!”

Further, an Indian School 12th grader from Santa Clara, Santo Domingo and Aztec communities describes her Senior Honors Project, requiring not only research but community action plans and a Spring symposium this way: “Bringing awareness to rural and poverty areas inside and outside of the United States that are affected by climate change. By doing the Adopt-the-River stewardship program through our Green Team Club, I was inspired to do more with this program and bring more Indian School students to restore and clean the river/watershed. I really enjoyed restoring the areas around the planted cottonwood trees as well as picking up trash. I decided to connect this to my project because this would bring a hands-on approach to reducing Santa Fe’s carbon footprint.”

Take heart, people.

To find out more about the Santa Fe Watershed Association and their Adopt programs, as well as community clean up days, visit santafewatershed.org.



Cullen Curriess

Who are the young river stewards?

Capital High School
Desert Montessori School
Rio Grande School
St. Michael’s High School
Santa Fe High School
Santa Fe Indian School
Santa Fe Preparatory School
Santa Fe Waldorf School
The Academy for Technology and the Classics

SWFA’s Jackson-Kennemore and Santa Fe Prep students ready to build tree wells.



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