

Her watershed moment

Christine Engel found role in preserving, teaching about vital waterway

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JEFF KAN LEE / The Press Democrat

Christine Engel of Santa Rosa found her passion when she began volunteering for the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation, where she has been serving as a docent since 2003. She serves as both a Learning Laguna volunteer and a Laguna Keeper.

For Christine Engel of Santa Rosa, feeling at home and happy with her role in her community was elusive for a long, long time.

She worked, she relaxed, she vacationed and completed the days of her life, but something just over the horizon was nagging at her. She wanted to volunteer in her community, but nothing felt right.

"Nothing made me feel connected in the way I wanted to be. I lived here. I appreciated it, but something was missing," she said.

It wasn't until 2003 when she attended a Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation meeting that she found what she was waiting for.

"I had no idea that I lived in this amazing, wonderful watershed. It made me feel that I would truly belong to this place," Engel said.

She jokes now that the Laguna de Santa Rosa advocates must have thought she was a little odd. "That night I asked to volunteer and signed up for docent training. I kept thinking, this is it; this is it," she recalled.

The Laguna de Santa Rosa is a 14-mile-long wetland that drains a 250-square-mile watershed encompassing most of the Santa Rosa Plain. It is home to river otters, badgers, deer and turtles. Bird species include white pelicans, great blue herons, egrets, kites, hummingbirds, quail, short-eared owls, mourning doves, red-tailed hawks and Nuttall's woodpeckers.

There are many ways to volunteer at the Laguna: Learning Laguna volunteers are trained to visit classrooms in advance of docent-guided nature walks and also to lead adult visitors. Along the trail, each step is an opportunity to enjoy a richer relationship with nature.

Laguna Keepers are restoration volunteers. At monthly gatherings they focus on planting native plants or removing invasive plants. Usually 20 to 50 volunteers pitch in on Laguna Keepers days.

There are also specially trained volunteers who are Vernal Pool Monitors.

"They are our citizen scientists. They conduct counts on plants, track water levels and do general monitoring of the pools," said Christine Fontaine, director of education programs for the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation.

Christine Engel is a Learning Laguna volunteer and Laguna Keeper. A passionate bird watcher, she is also on the Laguna's bird survey team.

"I have trouble saying no to anything the Laguna people ask me to do," she said.

When Engel was searching for a meaningful way to volunteer, she knew she had a hunger for something to soothe her soul. She discovered that she needed greenery and water, birds and grasses, trees and sky.

"I used to see mustard growing off the road and think, 'Oh, that's nice.' I was passing things by. Now it takes me forever to walk down a trail," she said.

She said she has focused her retirement energies on learning all she can about nature. She pushed aside an old passion for reading fiction so that she could immerse herself in science magazines and listening to bird calls on tapes.

She has seen a coyote with a rabbit in its mouth and shown a child how to gently handle a baby garter snake. She knows now that California Towhees mate for life and chatter like

bickering humans. Indeed, the love of birds she developed at the Laguna led her to another volunteering gig at the Song Bird Hospital in Sebastopol.

Had she not attended that first meeting, would her life be different?

"I look at retirees, traveling like crazy, remodeling their homes or taking up hobbies to fill up time, and I am so grateful to have found my true passion," she said.