

Lewis Center educator's classroom not bound by walls

December 28, 2011 9:00 AM -

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Editor's note:

Today we continue our 10-part series profiling some of the people who made a difference in 2011. Those profiled were nominated by Daily Press readers, with the finalists selected by the Daily Press staff.

From the 2011 Person of the Year series:

APPLE VALLEY • When she reminisces about high school, Molly Estes recalls the unique thrill of launching a refuge effort to revive the endangered Mohave tui chub fish.

Ethan Sockwell remembers the excitement of pinpointing a black layer in a wash as evidence of a fireplace that once warmed an American Indian tribe — and then graphing the coordinates using geographic information system technology. He reflects how cool it was to help preserve history as a high school student.

Sockwell is now an undergraduate sophomore studying GIS archaeology at University of Redlands, and Estes is in medical school at Loma Linda University.

The two former Academy for Academic Excellence students graduated five years apart, but they both credit the same influential teacher with fueling their ambition: AAE middle and high school coordinator Matthew Huffine.

“He was phenomenal. ... He encouraged this really active learning in the classroom, and for him the classroom extended well beyond the room itself,” said Sockwell, noting it’s because of Huffine that he’s pursuing a career in GIS. “He’s the kind of person that when you’re around him, he just empowers you to do things for the sake of exploring and learning new things.”

Huffine’s contagious passion for the natural sciences and efforts to involve students in unique projects with far-reaching impacts have earned him recognition as a top 10 finalist for the 2011 Daily Press Person of the Year.

Huffine, 53, of Victorville has been teaching for 24 years, including nine years at Hesperia Junior High and the past 11 years at AAE, the Apple Valley charter school run by the Lewis Center for Educational Research. He has three children, ages 26, 22 and 14 — the youngest now an AAE student.



CONTAGIOUS PASSION: Academy for Academic Excellence middle and high school coordinator Matthew Huffine's love of nature and mentorship impassions students.

JAMES QUIGG, DAILY PRESS

At AAE's Mojave River campus, Huffine has led projects to build safe habitat for troubled tortoises, launch an expansive recycling program, maintain a campus greenhouse, clean up ponds and clear away fire-hazardous brush. Last month students planted 1,600 seeds and seedlings as part of a joint study with Victor Valley College and several regional agencies that could reveal groundbreaking solutions to reviving disturbed natural habitat.

“He’s kind of a renaissance teacher. He is a guy that really embodies what we talk about with project-based education, and he understands so clearly how important it is for kids to be involved,” said Rick Piercy, CEO of the Lewis Center. “He is so excited about what he teaches — it’s so much a part of his life.”

Huffine traces his love of nature back to his childhood, a good portion of which he spent wet and muddy from playing in creeks. Though he was born on Long Island, N.Y., he grew up an Air Force brat, moving to a new home nearly every year until he turned 10 years old and settled down in Highland.

“I really didn’t have any long-term relationships with people, but I was able to see the world,” said Huffine, whose homes included Alaska, Montana, Arkansas, Japan, Thailand and the Philippines. “In all of those places, I was able to play. I was able to climb trees. I was able to play in rivers and streams. I was able to be in nature, and I think that’s what left a stamp on me.”

When Huffine first set out for his career, his heart was set on working in the field.

At University of California, Riverside, Huffine double-majored in environmental science and biology. He spent his college summers feeding his passion — a U.S. Forest Service internship on the slopes of Mount Shasta, an organic chemistry course and a phlebotomy training in Truckee.

Huffine landed parttime jobs with the Forest Service and U.S. Geological Service. He loved spending a week at a time camping out in the field. He relished the joy of finding soil types and plants found nowhere else on Earth in McCloud, and figuring out ways to relocate nonnative beavers eating up aspen and damaging docks in Big Bear Lake and Lake Arrowhead.

But when government budget cuts meant a lack of job security, Huffine started rethinking his long-term options.

He never wanted to abandon his passion for environmental work, but he had a pivotal thought: He could impassion young minds and cultivate future generations of forensic biologists through teaching.

Huffine married one of his best friends from college and then spent two years working as a full-time beekeeper before pursuing his teaching credentials. Both he and his wife entered the master’s program at California State University, San Bernardino. The couple then served as missionary teachers, helping to open Hillcrest International School in Indonesia, where Huffine developed an outdoor educational program to accompany a spiritual retreat.

A member of High Desert Church since moving to the area in 1992, Huffine said as his faith has grown stronger in adulthood, he's connected his conservationist mindset to a spiritual call to stewardship of the physical world.

"Humans are put on the planet to be stewards , not abusers." Huffine said, "not just people who take things, but who give things back and make it better."

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