

Creek life exam expanded to education

Coal Creek Health Day a keeper despite controversial beginning

By Bob Fowler

Posted October 27, 2012 at 4 a.m.

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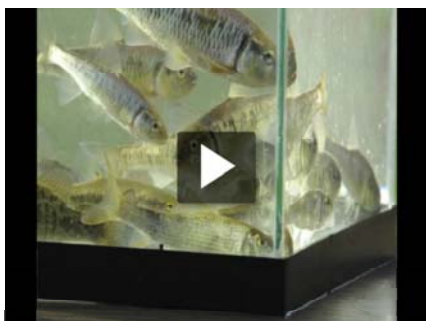


PHOTO BY J. MILES CARY

Students gather to see fish caught by Trout Unlimited volunteer Terry Douglas, left, and TVA biologist Charlie Saylor on Friday during the 12th annual Coal Creek Health Day in Briceville, Tenn. Local biologists were on hand to help Briceville Elementary School students survey aquatic life in order to judge the health of the creek in an event sponsored by the Coal Creek Watershed Foundation. (J. MILES CARY/NEWS SENTINEL)

BRICEVILLE — Local residents carrying protest signs greeted a fledgling nonprofit's first program to acquaint schoolchildren with creek life in their backyard 12 years ago.

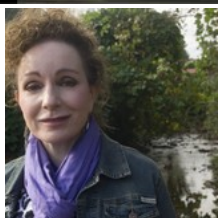
"They said it was the government with this high-tech, space-age gear



worrying about fish and ignoring people," recalled Barry Thacker.

Thacker said he listened to their concerns, ranging from frequent flooding of Coal Creek to a local health clinic shutting down.

marked a vast change for his new Coal Creek Health Day Foundation.



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Instead of only emphasizing the creek and cleanup efforts, Thacker said the foundation expanded its mission.

"We changed our entire focus to helping kids in the area get educations," he said Friday, the 12th annual Coal Creek Health Day. "That's the real motivation."

Kids from Briceville Elementary still look forward to the day, when they venture out to the nearby creek, watch a TVA employee give a section of water a mild shock, and then retrieve stunned fish for examination before they're released.

Other volunteers, from University of Tennessee and Trout Unlimited, are on hand to teach the children the arts of fly-tying and casting.

And the kids say it's one of their favorite days. "This is awesome," allowed fourth-grader Hunter Kanipe, 9. "It is really awesome."

The foundation has branched out. It conducts an annual Scholars Day, when college students from the impoverished, isolated area return to encourage students in the tiny school to consider college.

To date, the foundation has awarded \$250,000 in scholarships to 32 alumni of the elementary school, which now has 110 students in grades K-5.

When the foundation started, Thacker said he asked students how many planned to attend college. Only one or two hands went up, he said. Now, virtually all hands are raised when he poses that question, he said.

The foundation also takes children on field trips to do historical research, plant American chestnut trees on former strip mine sites and visit nearby locations of coal-mining disasters.

But the Coal Creek Health Day remains a favorite for kids, volunteers and teachers.

"It teaches them a lot of things," educator Donajo Clark said. Lessons learned at creek side are expanded upon



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Preschool and first graders from Briceville Elementary School check out at Coal Creek. A TVA biologist give a section of water a mild shock, and then retrieved stunned fish for examination by the

in the classroom, 4th grade teacher Michelle LaDue added.

And over the years, the creek's health is improving, Thacker said. Five years ago, Rainbow Darters — expected inhabitants but missing from the creek — were placed in it.

Health Day results from last year and Friday confirmed the species is reproducing, Thacker said.

"We're teaching them the creek is more important than just water going down a channel," said Charlie Saylor with TVA.



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Thank you for a great story that covers so many aspects. The kids loved the day and learned with this hands-on (hands-on-fish) experience. Thank you to Bob Fowler and J. Miles Cary!

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October 27, 2012
10:32 a.m.

MerrieLong writes:

Lovely article, lovely program!

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October 27, 2012
11:02 a.m.

voyagerdjc248#254895 writes:

Barry Thacker and Carol Moore are doing a fantastic job with the Coal Creek Watershed Foundation! This program has not only made a big difference in the lives of these school children, but also in the community as a whole. Attend any of the foundation events and you will come away having learned a great deal.

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If every person tried to make a positive difference in the life of a child or in a community, we would be astonished at what could be accomplished.

Kudos to Barry and Carol!