

## Coal Creek event celebrates watershed, community

Bob Fowler  
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BRICEVILLE — Some students at this tiny elementary school screamed, squealed and stepped backward when Barry Thacker held a crowdard, just plucked from the creek, up for view.

Seconds later, they eagerly moved forward to touch the critter.

Others got firsthand views and hands-on experiences with some of the dozen or so types of fish that call Coal Creek home.



First-grade students Logan Vanover, left, Cheyenne Johnson, Christopher Sharp and Riley Shetterly check out a stripped shiner held by University of Tennessee fisheries student Hayley Gotwald during the 15th annual Coal Creek Health Day on Friday at Briceville Elementary School. (PAUL EFIRD/NEWS SENTINEL)

The creek's inhabitants had received a small, harmless shock. Stunned, they were briefly captured in a seine by some of the 15 volunteers, examined by the students and then released.

It was the 15th annual Coal Creek Health Day at Briceville Elementary, located creekside in the heart of this isolated community snuggled in a valley of the Cumberland Mountains.

“I like going down and looking at the fish,” fourth-grader Zachary Byrge said.

By now, he’s a veteran of the event, put together by the nonprofit Coal Creek Watershed Foundation.

Another fourth-grader, Justin Moore, said he liked making the lures for fly-fishing and getting fly-fishing casting tips from members of the Clinch River chapter of Trout Unlimited.

“I’m still a kid,” chapter member and retiree Buzz Buffington said, “and I like working with kids.”

Teachers agreed.

“These adults are helping our children learn skills that we as educators will not have the opportunity to teach,” school librarian and technology expert Janis Bishop said.

Sponsoring the event has been an immensely rewarding task over the years, foundation member Carol Moore said.



**Carol Moore of the Coal Creek Watershed Foundation photographs third-grade students during the 15th annual Coal Creek Health Day on Friday at Briceville Elementary School. The bandannas are emblems of the coal miners in the 1890s Coal Creek War, of which some of the students are descendants. (PAUL EFIRD/NEWS SENTINEL)**

“We just fell in love with the school and these kids,” she said. “Last year, I fell in the creek. The kids asked me today, ‘Are you going to fall in the creek again?’ ”

Her boss, Barry Thacker, president of Geo/Environmental Associates Inc. of Knoxville and an avid angler, formed the foundation.

The nonprofit was first focused on the creek but quickly evolved to emphasize the well-being of the residents of the impoverished area.

The foundation has awarded thousands of dollars in scholarships to Briceville Elementary alumni, many of whom have graduated from colleges and are now in rewarding careers.



**TVA contract biologist Charlie Saylor, left, University of Tennessee research associate Joyce Coombs, UT research technician Justin Wolbert, and TVA aquatic biologist Jon Michael Mollish capture fish during the 15th annual Coal Creek Health Day Friday, Oct. 30, 2015, at Briceville Elementary School. (PAUL EFIRD/NEWS SENTINEL)**

And the creek has thrived as well, Thacker said. It's not as polluted as it was years ago from coal-mining runoff.

"Mother Nature has improved the water quality," Thacker said.

A notable victory in creek restoration, he said, was the successful reintroduction of rainbow darters, tiny fish once prevalent in the meandering creek that disappeared during the coal mining's heyday.

As for the kids and Coal Creek Health Day, "this is their favorite day of the year," Thacker said.



Steve Brown of Trout Unlimited teaches fly fishing to third grade students Madison Barber, center, and Katelynn Kennedy during the 15th annual Coal Creek Health Day Friday, Oct. 30, 2015, at Briceville Elementary School. (PAUL EFIRD/NEWS SENTINEL)



TVA contract biologist Charlie Saylor, left, and TVA aquatic biologist Jon Michael Mollish capture fish during the 15th annual Coal Creek Health Day Friday, Oct. 30, 2015, at Briceville Elementary School. (PAUL EFIRD/NEWS SENTINEL)



**Buzz Buffington, left, and Dick Geiger, both of Trout Unlimited, teach fly tying to second grade students Alex Patterson and Rebecca Lyons during the 15th annual Coal Creek Health Day Friday, Oct. 30, 2015, at Briceville Elementary School. (PAUL EFIRD/NEWS SENTINEL)**



**Pre-kindergarten students Gavin Dugger, left, Tyson Powers, and Sophie Shetterly learn about fish during the 15th Annual Coal Creek Health Day Friday, Oct. 30, 2015, at Briceville Elementary School. (PAUL EFIRD/NEWS SENTINEL)**

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