

Napa Valley Register

Monday, November 1, 2010

Education comes to life on Napa's Connolly Ranch



Chef Greg Cole and his family prepared a buffet lunch for the 250-plus attendees at Connolly Ranch in October as it celebrated its first year as an independent nonprofit organization. From left are Sophia Cole, Beth Fairbain, Larsen Cole and Greg Cole. Cole owns Celadon and Cole's Chop House restaurants in Napa.

For third-graders in the cell phone age, learning about pioneer life from textbooks can be pretty boring.

Unless, of course, you get your hands dirty. Or you travel back in time.

This is precisely what educator Linda Benton did recently when she took her class from the Napa Valley Language Academy to a place named Connolly Ranch Education Center.

There, on a 12-acre farm just west of downtown Napa, Benton's pioneer curriculum quite literally came to life. Students groomed animals and cleaned their stalls, worked in the garden and spun freshly shorn wool into bracelets. The more they "labored," the better students understood what it was like to live in the valley more than 100 years ago.

"The experience provided a perfect foundation to explore our own community, how it began and how it has changed over time," Benton said, looking back. "By the time we arrived back at my classroom, my class had experienced the exhaustion and pleasure of a hard day's work."

Experiences like these are commonplace at Connolly Ranch. Though it's mostly open to the public by appointment only, the working farm provides dynamic, hands-on education programs in an outdoor setting for school children from all over the Bay Area. Its formal mission: To connect kids with nature through farm-based environmental education programs.

Technically, the place is the only working farm in Napa County with an educational component.

According to Michael Lauher, the site's education director, there are five main educational programs: farm animals, environmental history, gardening, pioneer life and woodland ecology.

A sixth program, dubbed "Dirt to Dine," which operates as a summer camp, spotlights the principles and practices of farm-to-table dining, a trend that started in Berkeley in the 1980s and has become popular today. This program operates in conjunction with Yountville Chef Michael Chiarello, whose wife, Eileen, is on the Connolly Ranch Board of Directors.



“There is no doubt that every person needs time to explore the outdoors and connect with nature,” Lauher said. “We make it easy.”

All told, more than 3,000 children visit the ranch and its historic barn every year — 2,500 with their schools, 300 through summer camps and another 300 through one-off classes sponsored by the local parks and recreation department.

Connolly Ranch wasn't always so education-oriented; it began as someone's farm.

For the better part of 100 years, that someone was a Connolly. Then, in the early part of last decade, Peggy Connolly bequeathed the property to the Land Trust of Napa County.

The Land Trust tried to run the facility as an educational center but had no luck. Instead of shutting the place down, Land Trust officials voted last year to spin it off as an independent nonprofit. Before the paperwork was finalized, they hired Bob Pallas as executive director.

Today, Pallas, a former advertising executive, oversees all development strategies, including fundraising.

This effort is a *mélange* of activities ranging from grants and personal donations to those aforementioned summer camps (which cost \$5 per kid per day). The Napa County Parks and Recreation Department runs a preschool program on-site, and gives Connolly Ranch 25 percent of all proceeds.

The Ranch also is the scene of the annual Napa Valley Art Festival, held every August; at that event, artists keep 60 percent of all sales, and Connolly Ranch gets 40 percent.

Pallas also oversees charitable ventures, of which there are many.

On Nov. 13, for instance, Connolly Ranch is partnering with Stone Bridge School to raise money for the school with a “Barnyard Bingo” event.

Instead of playing on real bingo boards, however, this game uses the earth as a board; the area is divvied up into a grid, a cow is released and whoever “owns” the grid where the cow poops first, wins (\$500 cash and a cubic yard of biodynamic compost).

“We just try to stay involved,” Pallas says of the fundraising efforts. “The best way to remind people you're out there is to offer fun programs that help the entire community.”

Looking forward into 2011, the event calendar at Connolly Ranch likely will get pretty packed. Already, Pallas and other board members are talking about a fundraising dinner that will feature celebrity chefs.

Then, of course, are two days the facility will be open to the public: Family Farm Day in June and Harvest Festival in October (this year's just passed).

Lauher, for one, is excited about all of these events. At the end of the day, he says, the more Napers learn about the environment through Connolly Ranch, the stronger their bonds to the local community will be.

“I think many people are disconnected from the fact that the earth sustains us, gives us food, clean water, fresh air, clothing and shelter, and if we don't care for our resources then we no longer have a way to survive,” Lauher said. “Hands-on learning is important for making these physical connections.”

Connolly Ranch Education Center, 3141 Browns Valley Road, Napa. 224-1894,
connollyranch.org.