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OJAI VALLEY NEWS

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Ojai Creek sees daylight for first time in years

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Sam Ruffin smiles as she helps plant native species in Libbey Park Saturday.

Dec. 11, 2012

Kit Stolz, OVN correspondent

This weekend, young and old alike joined together to bring a bit of sunshine to Libbey Park, specifically to a portion of Ojai Creek that used to flow through the Park.

“That creek now has seen daylight for the first time in forty-five years,” said Wally McCall, who directs the C.R.E.W. (Concerned Resource and Environmental Workers). “It’s called daylighting. We now have a really fully formed creek, complete with cobblestones

and running water in the bed, for the first time in about a half a century.”

The effort was financed by state and federal grants, including \$60,000 from the California Department of Fish and Game, and smaller grants from Patagonia and Bank of America, according to McCall.

Portions of Libbey Park have largely been restored by similar efforts over the past two years. Now the restoration is moving downstream, and the volunteer effort – also involving the Ojai Valley Green Coalition – will continue to remove blackberry vines and other invasive species and replant with native species.

McCall said the preparations for the planting this weekend took months of difficult work by his young group of about 16 workers using chainsaws, weedwackers, and other power tools.

“We took out 52 two-ton truckloads of plant waste,” he said. “That includes vinca (periwinkle), Himalayan blackberries and other invasive species. “We completed that process in June and then started to prepare for the planting.”

David White, who participated and helped co-ordinate the volunteer effort for the Green Coalition, said that the mulching and planting work would not have been possible without the C.R.E.W. efforts

“The Himalayan blackberry vines had completely taken over the creek bed,” he said. “They were head high, and twice that in some places.”

Brian Holly, a restoration ecologist who used to play on the creek when he was young, expressed his happiness with the effort put forth by the community.

“You literally could not walk through there before, but now it’s been completely cleared out,” Holly said. “It’s really quite nice there now, right behind the park. We have definitely seen a lot of community members come down to enjoy it.”

Holly said he felt the creek restoration effort has become sustainable not just in terms of a creek system, with invasive species removed, and native plants hand-watered all through the long summer season, but also in terms of community backing.

“It’s been a combination of a well-established workforce of the C.R.E.W., and a good effort on the part of the volunteers,” he said. “Not only is it a good deed in terms of the project, but I think it’s also a good deal for the youth in the valley. I feel like we’re definitely reaching several different goals with minimal funding.”

The focus in this effort is on the Lower West Barranca, a tributary to Ojai Creek. Holly hopes to extend the project downstream to Stewart Canyon Creek, a two-year project that will require \$500,000, even with labor mostly donated by volunteers.

Crystal Davis, who directs outdoor education at the upper campus of Ojai Valley School, said her students felt invested in the project from past experience, and from seeing photos of students working on the project in past years.

“Much of what we did was a continuation of what we have already learned about with native plants,” she said. “They got tired, because they worked really hard, but we had fun. A number of the students gave the plants names, so that they can come back and visit them later when they go to the park.”

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