

**CONTRA COSTA TIMES**

---

Posted on Wed, Mar. 08, 2006

## **Environmental program wins national award**

**A Martinez school is recognized for its local efforts**

**By Nargis Nooristani**  
**STAFF WRITER**

Between bites of turkey and gravy and a day-after slice of pumpkin pie, Rona Zollinger spent her Thanksgiving vacation going over her and her students' accomplishments and putting it all into a 15-page report.

Sacrificing part of her holiday paid off Feb. 16 when Zollinger received a call, notifying the Environmental Studies Academy instructor that her program, in conjunction with the Alhambra Creek Environmental Education Collaborative (ACREEC), was selected as a winner of a \$10,000 national award.

"It's great just to be part of a network of people that do great work and to be recognized for it," Zollinger said of her students and their partnership with ACREEC.

It didn't take long for the news to travel to the rest of Zollinger's class.

"I called them all immediately," she said. "They were so excited."

The Sea World/Bush Gardens Environmental Excellence Award is given to grass-roots school projects aimed at environmental preservation.

The Environmental Studies Academy, an alternative high school program housed on the Martinez Adult School campus, was one of eight winners chosen from a pool of 151 programs that were considered. In addition to the financial prize, Zollinger along with three students will receive an all-expenses-paid trip to an Anheuser-Busch theme park for an awards event in October.

The environmental collaborative snagged the win because of its work on local efforts, such as an environmental education project teaching John Swett Elementary School students; Sky Ranch/Muir Heritage Land Trust restoration project; restoration of the Alhambra Creek; and a more-distant environmental education project in Modoc County, a six-hour trek north.

Zollinger said part of the award money may go toward a vehicle to make travel away from the campus easier. If there's any money left over, she said they will look into incorporating art, such as carving a totem pole or painting a mural, within their project areas.

Marshall Burgamy, director of alternative and continuing education and also co-founder of ACREEC, said although many people are responsible for the success of the local restoration projects, Zollinger is responsible for inspiring her students.

"Her dedication to her work and students have made her the key and center for this," he said.

Burgamy said the hands-on approach she incorporates in her lessons have given students, who might have otherwise given up on lecture-based education, a different perspective on learning.

"We're giving a different path to students who are pursuing an alternative education," Burgamy said.

When he heard the news about the award, he said it made him forget the rough start the school endured when the New Year's Eve storm flooded the campus and resulted in more than \$1 million in damages.

"I was exhilarated that we could be recognized nationally for what we do," he said. "It made my year."

---

Reach Nargis Nooristani at 925-682-6440, ext. 29, or [nnooristani@cctimes.com](mailto:nnooristani@cctimes.com).

---

© 2006 ContraCostaTimes.com and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved.  
<http://www.contracostatimes.com>