

Cal Poly insiders keep outdoor school running

by Jaime Zuffoletto (JOUR '99)

Rancho El Chorro Outdoor School teaches that everything in nature depends on something else. And the school itself is no different.

Located among the hills and valleys of the Central Coast, it depends on nearby Cal Poly students for daily maintenance and support.

When it first began more than 25 years ago, the program was developed out of a need for an outdoor educational facility for schoolchildren on the Central Coast. Now Rancho El Chorro Outdoor School's reputation precedes it. With the help of the only Central Coast marine biology lab available for schoolchildren, the school attracts young students from as far away as Yosemite and San Diego, and word of mouth continues to spread.

During the school's busiest time of year, up to 1,500 schoolchildren may attend its day programs each week, spending several hours exploring trails and spotting animals around the campus. The residential program, which usually draws around 90 children a week, lasts longer. Students spend three to five days participating in activities, discussing characteristics and traits of animals, and spotting birds, lizards, and snakes on various trails.

But it's what, or who, the students may not see that is helping to keep the school going — the Cal Poly student helpers.

"They're out of sight, but not out of mind," says Program Director Celeste Royer. "Our Cal Poly students are an important part of the program. They allow us to do our jobs, to teach the children and not have to worry about the maintenance of the animals."

In fact, Cal Poly students take care of almost 20 different species at the outdoor school and numerous others in the marine science

classroom at the Diablo Canyon Biology Lab. Students clean the cages and tanks of snakes, mice, sharks, and fish, feed the animals, and perform maintenance jobs around the 250-acre campus.

Last year PG&E, after many years of support, considered cutting its portion of funding for the lab completely. Royer and Cal Poly Biological Sciences Professor Mark Moline lobbied to keep it open. Now, instead of PG&E staffing the lab, Moline is responsible for overseeing Cal Poly students in its care and maintenance.

"Under the new deal, Cal Poly students staff the marine lab," says PG&E Biologist Sally Krenn. "They usually work about three days a week, a couple of hours a day. They make it possible for the children to see marine life in a clean and healthy environment." But it's not just the care the Cal Poly students give to the animals that makes them so invaluable to the program — it is also their willingness to help, whenever and wherever it is needed.

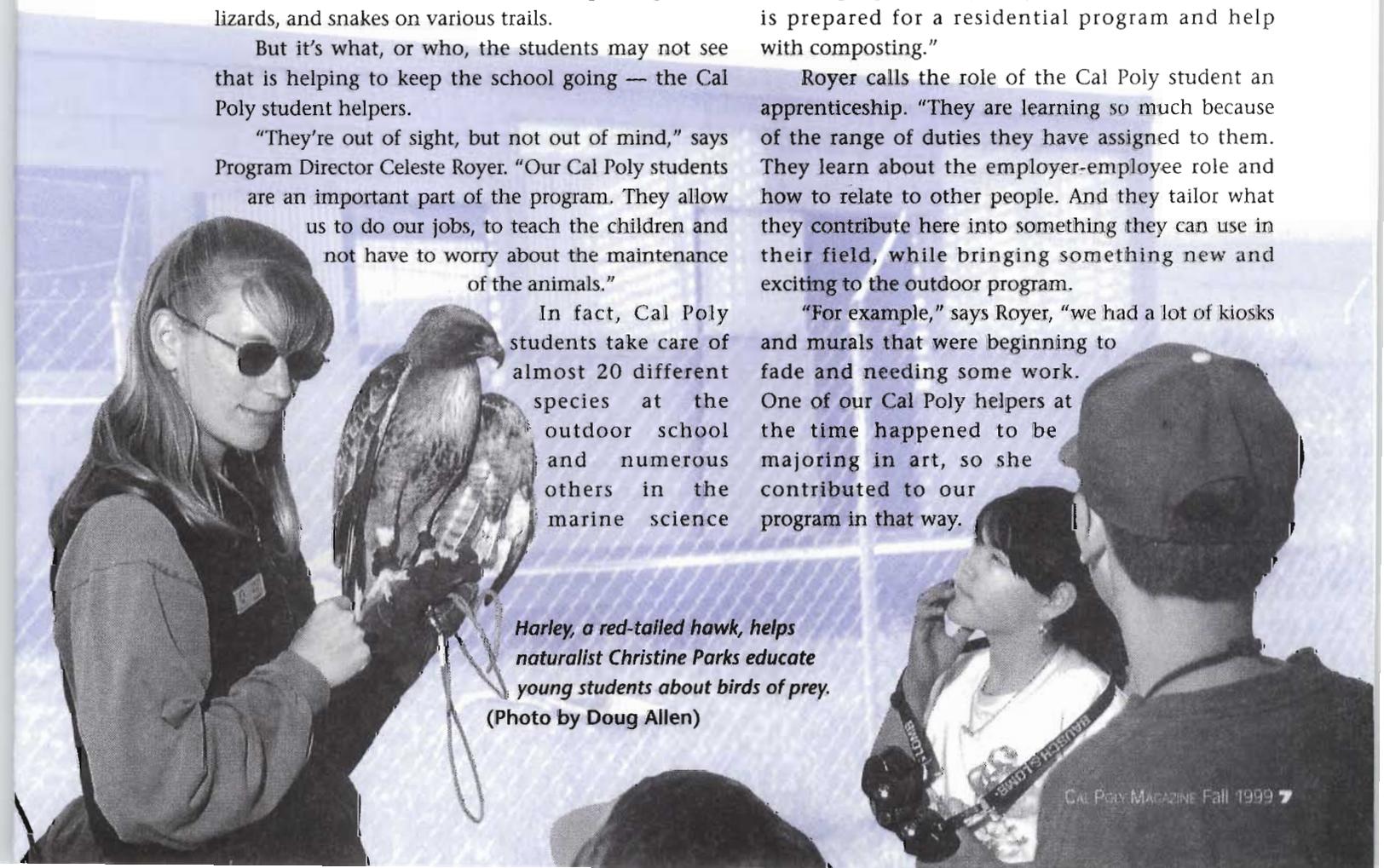
"Cal Poly students do some landscaping and custodial work, and some even work in our food service program," says Royer. "They see how food is prepared for a residential program and help with composting."

Royer calls the role of the Cal Poly student an apprenticeship. "They are learning so much because of the range of duties they have assigned to them. They learn about the employer-employee role and how to relate to other people. And they tailor what they contribute here into something they can use in their field, while bringing something new and exciting to the outdoor program.

"For example," says Royer, "we had a lot of kiosks and murals that were beginning to fade and needing some work. One of our Cal Poly helpers at the time happened to be majoring in art, so she contributed to our program in that way.

Harley, a red-tailed hawk, helps naturalist Christine Parks educate young students about birds of prey.

(Photo by Doug Allen)



Another student helped us create our curriculum for part of his senior project.

"All of our Cal Poly students have had something to share with us and with the children who pass through here. So much so that last year we nominated Tadashi Moody, one of our Cal Poly students, as Student Employee of the Year, and he was selected as the first runner-up."

Moody, a forestry and natural resources senior at Cal Poly, began working for Rancho El Chorro Outdoor School in October 1997 and has continued to do so because of the friendly

work atmosphere and the experience he gains.

"At first I just took care of the animals and got materials ready for the labs and kept up the maintenance on the trails," says Moody. "After a month I expressed my interest in teaching, and they allowed me to guide some groups on a couple of hikes."

Moody feels the experience has allowed him to follow Cal Poly's credo of "learn by doing."

"It's fantastic for the Cal Poly students because they let us get out there and do what we love," says Moody. "It's also invaluable for the children because they are immersed in a camp where they learn about science and nature, and how it relates to their lives."

Christine Parks (ESB '95) is just one of the naturalists who teaches students how nature relates to their lives. Parks, who was a Cal Poly student helper before she became a naturalist, also believes the partnership between Rancho El Chorro Outdoor School and Cal Poly students is mutually beneficial.

"Cal Poly students learn so much from their experience here," says Parks. "The work they are doing helps them grow as people."

Royer agrees and uses Parks herself as an example.

"When she first came to us, Christine was shy and lacking in self-confidence," says Royer. "But with her determination to teach and learn, she has emerged not only into one of our finest naturalists, but as a leader among her peers."

"For people who plan to teach, it is essential to get as much experience as possible," says Susan Roper, director of Cal Poly's University Center for Teacher Education. "Rancho El Chorro's program gives students an opportunity to find out if teaching is what they really want to do."

"It's a win-win situation all around," says Royer. 

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~ Celeste Royer

Program Director, Rancho El Chorro Outdoor School