Digital storytelling gives voice to Sierra Valley farmers

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Sierra Valley landowners are exploring a new approach to education and advocacy of the land and a lifestyle they hope to preserve for themselves and for generations to come.

Through autobiographical recordings, background music and a collage of individually selected visual images, ranchers, farmers and landowners give a living history of and from the land.

The place-based dialogues about agricultural viability and resource stewardship of the Sierra Valley tell of the personal challenges, rewards and hurdles faced by Sierra Valley residents who choose to hang on to their rural way of life.

Called "Passion for the Land," the digital storytelling project is a joint effort of the U.C. Davis Cooperative Extension in Plumas and Sierra counties and the Art of Regional Change at U.C. Davis.

The project is a learning and teaching tool uniting ranchers, farmers, scholars, faculty, students and local organizations to create place-based storytelling projects designed to educate and give a voice to rural citizens concerns.

The hoped-for outcome is ultimately a change in the culture by increased collaboration and creative participation in the development of rural communities where community members learn from one another, and rural residents gain understanding of how residents' efforts connect to the larger discussion of cultural viability and resource stewardship.

In addition, officials gain insight into the issues impacting the region that better informs policy reflective of regional needs.

"It's a connection between the community and the university," said Co-Director Siskah Maria Ross, who hopes the relationship will be mutually beneficial in that scholarship, the tradition of universities and local change, the outcome of community, will be enhanced by one another.

"Scholarships can help enhance community change and maybe community change can shape how scholarships and teaching evolve.

"Ross said storytelling provides in place and personal meaning have a tangible, emotional impact on storytellers and listeners alike.

"It's a powerful way, in a short amount of time, to convey your connection to a place or event or an issue in a way that other people can absorb, and they can respond to it in a piece of interest as opposed to negativity or conflict.

"One of the storytellers, Vincent rancher Dave Goss, told his story in "Passing it on." Goss and his wife, Dori, offer young, urban dwellers from town a ranch experience so they can appreciate a connection to where their food comes from.

"On a broader scale, visits to the ranch give community members an idea of how their decisions at the ballot box impact rural ranchers like the Gooses.

Other Sierra Valley storytellers included are Rick Rothe, Judi Heavenly, Carol Dobbs, George Godwin, Lacey Maddalena, Holz George, Cindy Maddalena and Gia Marnitz.

Press release coverage of the stories and a blog site resulted in emails and letters of thanks to the storytellers for sharing their stories and for being stewards to the land.

"It demonstrates that place matters," said Ross, who talked of the uniqueness of rural residents in exposing personal details about their families and lives when first approached about the project. Ross credits "the deep trust" the farmers had in project co-director Holly George, longtime livestock and natural resource advisor for Plumas-Sierra communities, for persuading the hesitant farmers to open up.

George said the personal stories offer an important tool to listen to the land.

"Ranchers may raise cows and cut hay, but also participate in bird and watershed restoration," said George. In addition, the videos provide a valuable educational tool for policymakers and urban residents willing on issues in rural sectors who are ignorant of their impacts or who may look toward a uniform model in environmental regulation, said George.

"One-size-fits-all doesn't work for small farms or tennis shoes ... why do we think it would apply to environmental regulations that we're going to apply from Medoc to Bakkenfield?"

Once the camera-shy rural residents witnessed the final product, a new version of personal agency replaced their anxiety.

"They liked what they saw and heard and realized the novelty and importance of their message," said Ross.

The digital stories are being shared for the development of an outreach program with the help of environmental historian Karen Warren, and geographer and social scientist Ryan Gall, both faculty members at U.C. Davis.

Rancher Dave Goss tells his story to co-directors Siskah Maria Ross (right) and Holly George. (Photo submitted)

Sierra Valley rancher Rick Rothe, one of the storytellers in "Passion for the Land," grew up on the area undergards Frank Davis and Anne Jensen. A tour of his farm. The digital stories and visits to the ranch have had a profound effect on Jensen, who studied community development at Plumas-Sierra Community College.

Rick Rothe, a noted environmental activist and Sierra Fund board member, is a pasture manager and farm manager for the Sierra Fund. The Sierra Fund is a nonprofit organization that tries to educate the public about current environmental issues.

For more information on "Passion for the Land," contact Siskah Maria Ross at 530-934-2035.