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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. Scholars engage with community members to learn from one

another, and rural residents gain understanding of how residents' efforts connect to the larger discussion of agricultural viability and resource stewardship.

In addition, officials gain insight to 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 Jesikah 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 are done."

ross said storytelling grounded 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 place of interest as opposed to negativity or combat."

One of the storytellers, Vinton rancher Dave Goss, told his story in "Passing it on." Goss and his wife, Doris, offer young, urban dwellers from Reno 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 Gosses.

Other Sierra Valley storytellers included are Rick Roberti, Bill Loverage, Dave Carol Dobbas, George Godwin, Lacey Maddalena, Holly George, Cindy Maddalena and Gia Martynn.

Prior press coverage of the stories and a blog site resulted in e-mails 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 uneasiness 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 coun-



Rancher Dave Goss tells his story to co-directors Jesikah maria ross (right) and Holly George. Photos submitted



Sierra Valley rancher Rick Roberti, one of the storytellers in "Passion for the Land," gives U.C. Davis undergrads Frank Davis and Anne Jensen a tour of his farm. The digital stories and visits with valley residents had a profound effect on Jensen, who studied community development and took a course on rural change to learn about Sierra Valley. She ultimately wrote a report on the storytellers, called "Sustaining the Sierra Valley Through Innovative Ranching Approaches," and became a summer intern with Gary Romano of Sierra Valley Farms.

ties, for persuading the hesitant farmers to open up.

George said the personal stories offer an important testimony to life on 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 in urban sectors voting on issues in rural sectors who are ignorant of their impacts or who may lean toward a uniform model in environmental regulation, said George.

"One-size-fits-all doesn't work for swimsuits or tennis

shoes ... why do we think it would apply to environmental regulation that we're going to apply from Modoc to Bakersfield?"

Once the camera-shy rural residents witnessed the final product, awe and a sense of personal agency replaced their anxiety.

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

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

ences, academic courses, for service groups, state regulators, community events and possible research.

A celebration of the project and community screening of "Passion for the Land" are scheduled June 6 at the Plumas-Sierra County Picnic at the Pioneer Schoolhouse. Screening times are 11 a.m., 12:30 and 2 p.m.

The final project will be available for viewing on the Web at artofchange.ucdavis.edu. The site allows visitors to comment and share their own stories.

For more information on the "Passion for the Land" project, contact Jesikah maria ross at jmross@ucdavis.edu, 754-6491, or Holly

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