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United Way names wetlands protector among community heroes

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BY DONNA JONES -- SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

WATSONVILLE — When Carol Whitehill retired from her job as a counselor at UC Santa Cruz about 10 years ago, her friends kept asking her what she would do next.

Her visits to bird-filled sloughs around the city that were threatened by urban development soon gave her the answer. She got involved, joining a small group of people trying to protect and promote the wetlands.

Friday, the Corralitos resident will be honored by United Way of Santa Cruz County as one of 23 Community Heroes for her work with Watsonville Wetlands Watch, most particularly for her leadership in raising money to build the nearly completed Patrick J. Fitz Wetlands Educational Resource Center on the Pajaro Valley High School campus.

"The wetlands are a wonderful and magical place and no one knew about them back then," Whitehill said during a visit to construction site Wednesday.

Today, the situation is very different, and the center — a collaboration of the environmental group, the city of Watsonville and the Pajaro Valley Unified School District — is a testament to the change.

In the 1990s, the city and environmentalists were at odds over development near the sloughs, and most people, if they thought about the wetlands at all, knew them as a dumping ground.

But in the past few years, in large part because of the efforts of Wetlands Watch, a new understanding of the sloughs as a precious resource has grown. The city has built 6 miles of trails along Watsonville and Struve sloughs in the past two years and established a nature center at Ramsey Park.

The resource center at Pajaro Valley High will provide another avenue for learning about wetlands. The roughly \$700,000 center will house materials and tools for teaching and research, as well as a classroom.

Much of the funding for the center came from large grants, but in another example of the burgeoning awareness of the value of the sloughs, about \$200,000 was donated by individuals from Watsonville, Whitehill said.

Whitehill said she appreciated the award because of the focus it put on the wetlands. As for her role, she said the work was hard but fun, because of the camaraderie of the group and the importance of the cause.

"Good land, good people, good opportunity," she said. "It's been a blessing."

The Community Hero awards are presented annually to recognize people working on meeting community goals in the areas of the economy, education, health, natural environment, public safety and social environment.

Other 2005 award winners include:

Lisa Dobbins, as executive director of Action Pajaro Valley, helped broker a compromise on Watsonville growth. The result was Measure U, an initiative passed by city voters in 2002 and spelling out how and where the city can grow during the next two decades.

Scotty MacDonald, county assistant chief probation officer, has developed many award-winning programs that have helped reduce juvenile arrest rates in the community and has succeeded in attracting grants to provide services to at-risk youth.

Dave and Kay Bartlett have volunteered hundreds of hours with Court Appointed Special Advocates, or CASA, advocating for abused and neglected children in the county and helping raise funds to support the nonprofit group.

Catherine Cooper, UC Santa Cruz psychology professor, and Elizabeth Dominguez, director of the Cabrillo College Advancement Program, collaborated to help low-income children, primarily from Latino families, get and stay on track for college.

Joya Winwood has led "Mothersong," a drop-in, low-cost music program for families with infants and toddlers, for more than 15 years.

Foster Anderson, a quadriplegic survivor of spinal cord injury, founded Shared Adventures, a nonprofit organization that has provided recreational and social opportunities for hundreds of people living with disabilities.

Tom and Judy Webster established the Adam Webster Memorial Fund for the O'Neill Sea Odyssey in 1999 after the death of their son and each year they contribute time and money to keep the program, which provides marine education to cognitively and physically challenged youth.

Regional Diabetes Collaborative, a volunteer project of the Pajaro Valley Community Health Trust, has worked since 2001 to coordinate and promote efforts to prevent and manage the disease.

Dr. Wells Shoemaker, the medical director of Physicians' Medical Group, spearheaded an effort to secure federal funding for a Web-based registry to standardize and improve treatment for local diabetes patients.

Lynda Lewit, a public health nurse with the Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency, works with children and families to ensure they receive coordinated and comprehensive health care.

Maria Christina Negrete, a leader in El Comit  Esperanza Para La Familia, has inspired parents locally and statewide to work to prevent drug and alcohol abuse and to be advocates for the welfare of children.

Juan Gomez of YCORP, Reclaiming Futures and Friday Night Live, has worked with many prevention and intervention programs targeting youth with histories of abuse, neglect or criminal involvement.

Brenda Armstrong has gone beyond the call of duty in her work with the Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency Drug and Alcohol Division to address youth binge drinking, drug use and other emerging youth issues.

Matt O'Brien, Danielle Winkler and Ryan McNamara of Quest4aCure have volunteered to raise money for cancer awareness and treatment.

Leslyn McCallum has worked to reduce racism and promote diversity as director of the nonprofit Train of Consciousness.

Karla Kleinsasser has advocated for quality child care for more than 25 years, and has worked with Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts programs in the San Lorenzo Valley.

Tamara Doan of the Coastal Watershed Council has trained hundreds of local citizens in water quality monitoring.

Austin Armstrong, a Scotts Valley High School student, worked with the Drumline Club to operate a recycling project that has kept more than 86,000 bottles and cans out of the landfill and raised thousands of dollars for teacher supplies and percussion equipment.