Improving the wetlands
one student at a time

BY JONATHAN MENARD

Barry Guillot's hands have just been pricked by an albino hedgehog.
That might seem like an unusual thing to happen to a seventh grade science teacher during the course of a school day, but it's hardly an unusual occurrence for Guillot.

"The kids just love the animals," Guillot said.
"Today I had an albino hedgehog and I told the kids to be quiet or it might just prick me. Of course, they started making a lot of noise."

Guillot has just exited Harry Hurst Middle School and is heading out to the Bonnet Carré Spillway. Recent events at the spillway have caused Guillot to switch the location for his 10th Wetland Watcher celebration.

The celebration, which brings 500 fifth grade students, along with industry representatives, Disney Radio and Amanda Shaw, out each year to help celebrate conserving the wetlands, is usually held at Guillot's Wetland Watcher Park.

With the spillway open, this year's celebration will be set up behind the spillway office instead of the park because the road leading to it is flooded.

Though setting up the event is always a hectic chore for Guillot, it's something he enjoys.

Guillot is a renaissance man of sorts and has worked as a bouncer on Bourbon Street, a sergeant in the army, and has also helped train security guards. He says that those experiences prepared him for dealing with middle school students.

Guillot, of course, never thought he would be a teacher. Instead, he had planned to make a career in the hotel service industry. But while in college, Guillot happened into a teaching career when he subbed for a kindergarten teacher for six weeks.

"I had heard that you don't even smile for the first two weeks so that you make the kids think you're mean," Guillot said. "The first day, I made a big impression on Guillot. He went into the army the next year, and eventually started working for a security firm that trained security guards on movie sets.

"I always missed teaching though and I missed the connections I had with the kids," Guillot said.

Guillot called the same school that he had taught kindergarten back and asked if they needed any help. They did and Guillot made his way back to the school.

"I can still remember walking up to the porch and think-
I'm never going to leave a school, and get into education. "I've never watered from water," he said.

Eventually Guillot's life would be changed forever when he went on a service learning trip with the University of New Orleans. Service learning is where students meet all their academic requirements through activities that help the environment and the community. Guillot realized how essential the program was, and brought it into his classroom.

"So when we go on a service learning trip, we plant trees, clean up trash, and do water quality testing," he said. "Those are all activities that directly benefit the community and the kids are meeting their required academics."

10 years ago, Guillot wrote his first grant to the Lieutenant Governor's office and got $5,000 for service learning. He also adopted an area in the spillway in order to make it an outdoor classroom.

"I couldn't believe it and it's just something that I started working with the kids to build," Guillot said. "At first, we did water quality testing and worked with the animals, but I started asking them what else they thought we should do. They wanted to plant trees, so I started calling people to get enough."

Barry Guillot poses for a picture with several students, along with Miss Louisiana, at last year's Wetland Watcher Celebration. The event serves as an introduction to fifth grade students about the projects that Guillot will involve them in middle school.

Guillot has 130 students in his classes and had no idea how he would ever manage to get that many trees. He started calling around and eventually got together with the USDA and the RCS, who told him they would give him 150 trees.

"I was shocked because the trees were around $30 to $40 a piece," Guillot said. "From that point on I realized that there are a lot of people in the state and our community that want to help out, but don't realize how many people there are."

"My job is to figure out what the kids want to do, who can help us, and how they can help."

Service learning opened a whole new door to Guillot because it allowed him to get more hands-on with his teaching techniques. For example, if Guillot's students are going to study reptiles, they don't just look up information on the internet. They come into class and have snakes, alligators, and snapping turtles staring back at them.

While the students were excited to feel and touch the animals from the comfort of their own classroom, it was the service trips themselves that really became popular. "We started off doing a few service trips with my class, but then other people started complaining that you had to be in my class to go on one," Guillot said. "So we made it a whole seventh grade trip and eventually made it a whole school trip. But every time we increased the amount of kids that would go, we had to increase the reason to go."

Guillot did that by involving other kids from other schools. Now, his students take other students on service trips, where they get the chance to serve as mentors. Guillot's students have also begun giving speeches at festivals around the state. This year, those students will speak to over 85,000 people.

"My kids are awesome at their speeches," Guillot said. "I tell them that they can be the smartest kids in the world, but if they don't know how to communicate what they know, then it's useless."

Four years ago, the land that Guillot first adopted was donated to the parish by the levee district. However, the levee district didn't want to donate the land, but added an additional 28 acres. The parish then named the park Wetland Watcher Park after Guillot and his band of students.

When it's all said and done, Wetland Watcher Park will have three outdoor classrooms, three quarters of a mile of boardwalk trail, a 10 foot marsh overlook, two fishing piers, picnic areas and a pirate themed playground for kids.

Guillot thanks local environmentalist Milton Cambre with attaining that land by writing grants and working with industry to reclaim three acres.

"Mr. Milton is an integral part of what we're doing," Guillot said. "He wouldn't have that land if it wasn't for him. He's my hero."

Now, Guillot is able to have eight service trips and one celebration a year. All in all, Guillot estimates that around 1,200 students from St. Charles Parish go on service trips every school year. "People say that I've been doing this for 10 years and they don't know why I'm still stressed," Guillot said. "I know there are still so many ways that I can improve the project to make it even more successful."

But even though his project has been extremely successful, there really is no rest for Guillot. After getting to the spillway, he meets with several corps officials about the best place to have the Wetland Watcher Celebration. Because the weather has been so hard to judge recently, Guillot has to pick up three spots. He draws a map with the location for where he thinks the tent will go in each of the three locations.

Still though, Guillot admits that the way his project is now, is so much more than he ever thought possible. "I never, never, never thought it would get this big," he said. "I never dreamed we would have the land donated and I never thought we would have 1,200 kids going out there. It was just supposed to be a good place to take my 150 kids for an outdoor classroom experience."