



The Conservation Legacy Effect

Featuring Jennifer Gunnels

Article by LORIE A. WOODWARD
Photo courtesy of CONSERVATION LEGACY

Veteran elementary school teacher Jennifer Gunnels discovered Conservation Legacy when she connected with a critter in a closet.

"I found a set of *Critter Connections* [Conservation Legacy's quarterly magazine designed for elementary-age children] in the back of a cabinet in my then-new classroom," said Gunnels, who has spent her 18-year education career at New Caney ISD near Houston.

Gunnels was changing classrooms because she was changing grade levels. After 13 years of teaching various subjects, she settled into her current position as science teacher.

"As a student, I'd always loved science and was excited to teach it, but I was desperate for materials," Gunnels said.

She flipped over the magazine, saw the logo, the website and the word "free"—and immediately checked it out.

"Anytime I can get free resources that I like, it's a win-win," Gunnels said.

She was captivated by the diversity and the depth of what she found: webinars, magazines, Discovery Trunks and in-class presentations.

"I signed up for everything I could," Gunnels recalled.

And five years later, she's still signing up for every available resource—and glad to do it.

"Although I stumbled across Conservation Legacy on a left-behind magazine, TWA quickly became my favorite organization to do things with," said Gunnels, who has attended two of Conservation Legacy's teacher workshops. "It's easy to request materials and they're all well done. The digital presentations are seamless. The teacher workshops are practical and worthwhile. And the in-class programs are just another gift to teachers."

According to Gunnels the diversity of offerings allows her to reach students regardless of their learning styles.

"Whether a student is a visual, kinesthetic or auditory learner, Conservation Legacy provides me materials so I can reach them," Gunnels said. "Regardless of what materials I use, it's always productive. I wouldn't keep doing it if it wasn't productive."

While it's always important to reach students, it's particularly important in the fifth grade where they encounter the STAAR (State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness) science test.

"A large portion of the STAAR test covers organisms and the environment, which is basically all of the things that Conservation Legacy covers so well in its materials," Gunnels said. "The fact that it is TEKS-aligned is huge."

One of the unanticipated benefits of Conservation Legacy has been the relationship she's forged with the natural resource educator who has been a guest in her classroom twice a year for the past four years.

"Kids love to ask questions and I'm not an ecologist, so sometimes they stump me," Gunnels said. "The conservation educator is an expert who knows the answer and is willing to share on their level. Plus, I can always pick up the phone and call if I don't know something myself."

Because she saw the program's impact in her own classroom, Gunnels began to spread the word about the resources with fellow teachers, both on her campus and in the district. She's been rewarded by seeing the program adopted at several other schools.

Gunnels now times her Discovery Trunk deliveries, so she can showcase the program at her school's annual Math and Science Night.

"Kids of all ages line up to participate in the hands-on activities," Gunnels

said. "And their parents are right there with them with their cameras out and their own questions ready. Conservation Legacy's approach works for people of all ages."

Q&A WITH JENNIFER GUNNELS

Prior to this program, did you have a connection with the outdoors and nature?

JG: "I'm a suburban woman with a connection to the outdoors, because unlike many people, I grew up in a family of hunters and fishermen. Learning and teaching about the natural world is what I lived in my own life.

Most of my students haven't grown up the same way, so when they hear hunting, they automatically think it's a bad thing. This curriculum gives me a chance to explain that hunting is part of population control that helps protect the habitat because having too many animals throws things out of balance and can cause damage.

Not many of my students have been exposed to that way of thinking, so it's challenging, but very worthwhile. Through the different facets of Conservation Legacy, I get to see a lot of 'ah-ha' moments."

How does it make you feel to open the door to nature for your students?

JG: "I love the fact that this experience in my classroom helps them make connections with not only the material, but with the world that exists outside our classroom. Being aware is the first step in opening their eyes to their surroundings and growing to appreciate the plants, the water, the air, the wildlife and everything else. They come to understand how humans can impact the world in both good and bad ways.

If I plant a seed and it grows into something that they remember and affects the way they live their lives as adults, then it is mission accomplished." ©