

Overflowing with influence

Local teacher recognized for inspiring students to sustain Carson River Watershed

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Linda Conlin of the Dayton River Wranglers always appreciated Carson City teacher Phyllis Atkinson's natural ability to engage students with nature at the source.

Recalling a hike with a group of students along a trail in Ambrose Park in Washoe County, Conlin described Atkinson's classroom management skills and aptitude for stimulating their curiosity about the importance of watersheds and the surrounding mountains.

"There's one spot where you hit the beach, and it's an expansive view of the surrounding mountains of Carson," Conlin said. "I always remember her hiking with kids and stopping at one point and asking what the word 'watershed' means. Most adults, frankly, don't know what it

means."

The CWSD has chosen Atkinson to receive the 2021 Andy Aldax Carson River Watershed Award for Exemplary Service in Conservation and Protection of the Carson River Watershed. The honor originated in 2007 and was named for CWSD board member and Carson Valley resident Aldax who died last February.

Recipients are selected based on their commitment to the watershed by remaining engaged in various activities for 10 years or more, producing certain accomplishments toward goals outlined in the Carson River Watershed Vision Statement and being a landowner, community member or employee of a federal, state or local agency or working in the watershed.

"It's quite an honor to be recognized in the same breath as they have been," Atkinson said of being

named among past recipients, including Conlin, Richard Wilkinson, Lynn Zonge, Pete Livermore, Norm and Sue Frey and Aldax himself with many others.

Atkinson retired in 2019 from Pioneer High School after 25 years in education and spent 24 of them with the Carson City School District. She was nominated for the award by the River Wranglers, a nonprofit that supports water quality issues by collecting data for local agencies, educating local students and the public and collaborating with state and federal agencies through various events and programs. The organization in the past has exhausted grant funding from the University of Nevada, Reno Cooperative Extension but has been kept alive through individual volunteers' and sponsors' efforts.

Atkinson came from Pittsburgh after being offered a position with the Bureau of Land Management and wound up in Ely at first. She came to

Carson City with her family in 1993 and obtained her first teaching position two years later.

Conlin, now project coordinator for the Wranglers but recently retired as its executive director, initially met Atkinson in Silver Springs. While Conlin approached Atkinson initially when she was teaching at Carson Middle School about providing students with field experience along the Carson River. Conlin recalled Atkinson as being "completely open and excited" about working in the classroom. She asked if Atkinson would put her eagerness for water quality education to use through field trips for students.

"Linda Conlin wanted to know if my classes would be interested, but I was in over my head," Atkinson said. "It was really hard for me with two small kids of my own. I said I would love to, that I would love to do that. Then, the principal came to me and said, 'Linda has done so much, you are going to go on this field trip!'"

That led to the next 20 years of her teaching career and a partnership with the Wranglers, inevitably resulting in Atkinson refining the curriculum in ways that made it more enjoyable for students to learn. Kids were able to check the pH and temperature of the river water as well as more practical for staff to teach through chemical test kits and materials, goggles and gloves. It also became more accessible and manageable for the nonprofit to maintain.

"We just really connected," Atkinson said of Conlin. "She taught me about life."

She also taught Conlin's daughter, Molly, and the respect as educators was reciprocated. Conlin said Atkinson's water monitoring trunk, provided by the Nevada Division of Water Quality Planning, were just the right tools to motivate students to entering whatever fields they decided to later as scientists, teachers, manufacturers or even as artists or politicians, all the while appreciating Nevada's natural landscapes.

"A good teacher is excited about what they teach," Conlin said. "She has passion and that is what helped her to link what she is teaching, from the concept that she is teaching in the classroom, to the river,



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Phyllis Atkinson

in her science project or in her science class. She was being paid to teach, but she certainly wasn't being paid to go above and beyond to teach about the Carson River."

Atkinson finally retired from Pioneer High School last year after 25 years in education. She had transferred there seeking something new after her time at CMS, she said. She was honored by PHS Principal Jason Zona at the school's Employee of the Year recognition event. Zona complimented her for her positive attitude and willingness to take the "path less traveled," he noted.

"Along with Phyllis' professionalism, leadership, success as science and CTE teacher and department lead at Pioneer, she always had a pleasant and helpful attitude," Zona said. "She mentored new teachers and represented PHS at CTE (Career and Technical Education) meetings to help keep our program supported in spite of our small size."

Darcy Phillips, executive director of the River Wranglers, said Atkinson's contributions have been invaluable for the organization's ongoing work, noting her ability to take the work virtual and asking Atkinson to become a consultant to transform the field trip activities back into a classroom setting again.

"She is that once-in-a-lifetime teacher that sticks with you," Phillips said. "She's the kind of teacher that makes me want to go back to high school to be

in her class! We are so fortunate that we get to work with amazing teachers all throughout the Carson River watershed - truly - but Phyllis is one of a kind. When COVID hit, we had to reinvent ourselves completely because we are normally out at the river with 100-plus kids.

"She kept us on task in terms of standards and how teachers work. ... We could not have done it without Phyllis. She's amazing. We love her dearly."

Atkinson was honored Wednesday with this year's Andy Aldax award during the CWSD's monthly meeting, where board members shared their thoughts on her as the best candidate this year and others noting her work as a board member on the River Wranglers and Friends of Silver Saddle Ranch, as well as a High Sierra Resources workshop instructor.

Kevin Piper of the Dayton Valley Conservation District said he has learned more from three influential educators on water issues, including Atkinson, Conlin and Dayton High School science teacher Sue Moreda.

"They've built quite a pedestal and the work they've done is insurmountable," Piper said.

Atkinson expressed her thanks to the board for the honor.

"It's overwhelming," she said, adding, "It's great to get out with the kids. You never think about you're going to get honored for something just because you have a passion for it."

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