

Honors Program students enhance learning with service at nature centers

Students in the Lee College Honors Program are taking their classroom exploration of humanity and nature into the real world, volunteering their time this semester at the Eddie V. Gray Wetlands Education Center in Baytown and the Exploration Green tree nursery in Clear Lake.

The student volunteers are part of the Human Condition, a unique Honors Program course that is team-taught this semester by instructors Georgeann Ward and Jerry Hamby. The seminar-style class combines the disciplines of English and the Humanities, emphasizing open discussion and encouraging students to ask bold questions and engage in critical thinking about the world in which they live.

Ward and Hamby introduced a unit focused on humanity's relationship with nature, making time spent at the local nature centers even more meaningful. The Human Condition class has been given assigned reading from "The Purposeful Place" by Richard Louv and "Writing Takes Place" by Sidney Dobrin, two pieces that address the ways that environmental spaces affect and influence the human experience.

"Students are using these two pieces as a theoretical base to study the arguments in other pieces of literature, film and art," said Ward, who also serves as coordinator of the Honors Program. "By having discussions and completing compositions using these ideas, we hope that students will begin to make connections between themselves, others and the world around them."

Completing community service also makes the students even stronger candidates for transfer to four-year institutions, which the Honors Program endeavors to do by providing opportunities for scholarship, leadership and service. "Our work with Exploration Green and the Eddie V. Gray Wetlands Center help us promote those goals," Ward said.

The students' decision to give their time to Exploration Green, in particular, struck a chord with Hamby, a certified Texas Master Naturalist who has completed about 100 hours of training and 250 hours of volunteer work to earn and maintain that credential. He has long been drawn to the natural environment and spends a significant amount of personal time in the tree nursery himself – planting and re-potting trees, weeding plants and helping maintain the irrigation system for the 1,000 trees on the property, representing more than 40 different species.

Nurturing and learning about plants, animals and the bio-diversity found in the Houston region gives Hamby a feeling of joy, sense of purpose and awareness of the power of place. He hopes the same lessons will resonate with the students in his classes, much in the way the seeds they plant at the nursery may blossom into trees that endure for generations.

"We want to stress the idea that learning requires you to occasionally step outside of your comfort zone," Hamby said. "Your education isn't sitting in a classroom; real learning takes place beyond those walls."