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Screenwriter uses green power to help Vallejo's at-risk youths

By Rachel Raskin-Zrihen/ Times-Herald staff writer

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Rita LeRoy points out the start of a waterfall to screenwriter Gregory Allen Howard, right, during a visit to Loma Vista Farms in Vallejo. (Associated Press)

Green technology, livestock, at-risk youth and screenwriter Gregory Allen Howard don't, at first glance, seem to have much in common.

But they came together on Vallejo's Loma Vista Farm on Friday for a common purpose -- to promote solar energy and other environmental efforts at the facility.

Vallejo native Howard, who wrote "Remember the Titans," said he grew up not far from Loma Vista Farm, but said he didn't know until Friday that it existed.

"I can't believe this is here," Howard said. "It's a little gem, a little oasis, right in the middle of Vallejo. And it's so relaxing to be around the animals. It's life-affirming."

Howard was on hand Friday to present a \$500 donation to help a group of low-income and at-risk local youth learn about "green jobs" while helping install solar panels at the farm, said Kalid Meko, director of the local Camp Fire USA's Green Flame Program.

The program is funded by federal stimulus dollars through Solano County's Workforce Investment Board, Meko said.

"We hope to install a solar-powered pump in the pond, and Greg Howard is helping with a donation," Meko said. "We're working with a solar company that's going to come in and show the boys how it's done and give them hands-on experience."

While Meko learned Friday that to make a solar-powered pump functional will likely cost \$10,000, other, less pricey solar projects are needed, farm keeper Rita LeRoy said.

"If we can't do the pond right away, we'll do the rabbit hutch," she said.

The manmade pond, which is a hang-out for dozens of water fowl and turtles, has had no working pump in at least 20 years, creating a stagnant, less-than-optimally healthy environment, LeRoy said. A waterfall, being repaired with help of local Kiwanis Club members, will help recycle the pond's water, she said.

Brandon Kelly of Vallejo, 19, said that in the week he's been with the Green Flame program, he's learned the importance of green technology.

Times-Herald

"I've been learning about green jobs; jobs that help the earth," he said.

Matthew McGee of Vallejo, 19, said he's been with the program for two months. In that time he's further developed an existing interest in biofuels, he said.

"I've learned there are all types of green power, like wind, water, bio-diesel, and that working in the sun with other guys is rewarding, and I never thought it would be," McGee said.

McGee said he hopes one day to operate his own bio-diesel business.

"It's looking toward the future, toward saving the planet," he said.

Howard said that although he grew up near the farm, he had no idea it was there until Friday. Impressed with his tour of the facility, including the animals and the wide-ranging educational component to the operation, Howard said he plans to return to hang out.

His visit reminded him of something important much of society often loses track of, he said.

"The problem with urbanization is we lose our connection to the land, to the animals," Howard said. "You need to develop some respect for the animals and the earth."

The Green Flame team also will help improve the farm's mini vineyard, which is between its greenhouse and its mini fruit orchard, just around the corner from the mini Native American village, LeRoy said.

The youth, the green job training, the farm -- it's a perfect match, Meko said.

"My thing is to get (the youth) into the green industry, which is getting ready to take off in this country," Meko said. "The farm needs a pump, so we're going to try and do that. We've already built a fence for them and we help maintain the garden, and that's agriculture."

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