



AMAZON CREEK

PHOTO BY TODD COOPER

The Trouble with Tributaries

Restoring the urban Amazon BY AMY SCHNEIDER

Walking through downtown, it's easy to miss Eugene's wayward waterway, hidden in culverts and secreted away behind swathes of pavement and sidewalk. Though Amazon Creek shares its name with a mighty South American river, the comparisons stop there. It once provided a connective pathway for fish and other wildlife traveling from its headwaters near Spencer Butte to the Long Tom River, which further connects to the Willamette River and drains all the way to the Pacific Ocean. But after heavy restructuring in the 1940s and '50s to mitigate stormwater flooding, Amazon Creek took on an entirely different persona.

Over the decades, the creek has succumbed to the pressures of its urban lifestyle. Stormwater drains directly into this

tributary of the Willamette, carrying with it pesticides, heavy metals from parking lots and motor oil from leaky cars. Algae grows in the stagnant waters near South Eugene High School, forming a thick layer of slime during the summer, and the canals that redirect Amazon Creek's flow seem more like stagnant moats than a corridor in a healthy ecosystem.

Amazon Creek has its flaws, but like a delinquent child, it also has a number of people interested in its welfare. One of those people was Erin Noble, whose parents live close to the Amazon headwaters. Before his death in a 2012 airplane crash in Veneta, Erin used to hike from his parents' house near the headwaters all the way to Spencer Butte several times a week.

"He felt very attracted and drawn to this place," says Deborah Noble, his mother, who has been actively involved in acquiring the Amazon headwaters for preservation.

Erin's friends say that he was a true adventurer, and

not a moment of his 27 years was wasted. He traveled to England, France and Peru, hiked along the Pacific Crest Trail and always made friends along the way. His passion for people and the environment was a source of inspiration.

Erin Noble's love of Eugene and its natural areas came to the surface in June 2012, when he approached his dad about helping out with the Southeast Neighbors of Eugene in their goal to protect the headwaters. "Erin came to me and said, 'Let's save the Amazon headwaters, Dad,'" says Peter Noble, a longtime businessman in the timber industry and founder of West Wind Forest Products.

Erin intended to join the conservation efforts after he finished volunteering for the Oregon Country Fair, but the plane crash prevented him from carrying out his goal.

"I was really excited about the things he was saying," says Kevin Matthews, former longtime president of the Southeast Neighbors. "His energy would have been a