

‘There are people who remember playing in Amazon Creek when they were little. It’s not that far off — we’ve got a lot of potential.’

— DANA DEDRICK, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE LTWC

huge asset to getting people involved. He had an honest enthusiasm and an infectious light that could really connect with a lot of people.”

In his honor, Erin’s parents launched the Be Noble Foundation, a nonprofit devoted to raising enough money to acquire the Amazon headwaters and protect them from development. Erin’s friends and family say they are committed to carrying on his spirit and legacy by saving the land he loved. They want to see a change in the way Eugene’s natural resources are treated.

So far, the Amazon headwaters have avoided major restructuring from development, and the Nobles want to keep it that way. Nestled in the south hills of Eugene just above Martin Street, the headwaters carry water from the upper reaches of Amazon Creek to the lower portions, including those that run through town. The Ridgeline Trail follows segments of the creek, surrounded by towering oak trees and Douglas firs. Glimpses of Spencer Butte loom through the tree-shrouded sky, and the quietness that comes with a natural area prevails, save for the gentle tumbling of the stream. As water flows down from this area, it carries food, nutrients and debris to the ecosystems farther down, although right now, there’s not much of a functioning ecosystem directly below.

But for Amazon Creek, change is happening. The Long Tom Watershed Council (LTWC) works with local businesses to improve water quality through simple measures such as landscape alteration. By building rain gardens and bioswales, areas of vegetation and soil that slow the entry of water into the stormwater system, businesses along the creek can reduce their impact on the creek’s water quality. Already, the LTWC has partnered with In Shape Athletic Club to remove excess asphalt from their property and replace it with soil and native plants, allowing stormwater to filter through instead of draining directly into the creek.

“We have to increase the demand for those kinds of landscapes,” says Dana Dedrick, executive director of the LTWC. “We’d love to have more Amazon Creek champions, and now that we know a lot of our vision is possible, much more possible than we thought, we want to keep building the community support.”

Dedrick says that the LTWC envisions an Amazon Creek that allows safe passage for trout and other wildlife, and with each improvement to the land surrounding Amazon Creek, the prospect of a healthy habitat draws a little closer. “Imagine angling for trout from Fern Ridge Trail,” Dedrick says. “There are people who remember playing in Amazon Creek when they were little. It’s not that far off — we’ve got a lot of potential.”

Last year, the LTWC discovered three native cutthroat trout in the lower reaches of Amazon Creek all the way near Junction City, further confirming the creek’s capacity for harboring native species as it once did. Dedrick says the

fish were all around one foot long and were found about a quarter mile from where Amazon Creek connects to Long Tom River. “What they’re likely doing is exploring,” Dedrick says. “Some experts firmly believe that trout can successfully inhabit Amazon Creek.”

It will take some time and effort, possibly including modifications to the concrete sections of the creek. But Jason Schmidt, the LTWC’s urban watershed restoration specialist, says that controlling water pollution is a big step in the right direction. If local businesses continue making adjustments to their landscapes, Amazon Creek could be well on its way to a state of remission.



DEBORAH NOBLE IN THE FOREST WHERE HER SON ERIN USED TO HIKE

PHOTO BY TRASK BEDORTHA

But the Nobles’ vision of a healthy Amazon isn’t yet a sure thing. While groups like the LTWC are helping the creek revert to a more natural state through town, the waterway’s point of origin might go in the opposite direction. The Amazon headwaters area is currently slated for development by Leslie and Martin Beverly, who own a 26-acre parcel of land that includes a portion of the headwaters. The Beverlys did not respond to a request for comment for this story.

For more than 10 years, the Southeast Neighbors have worked together to block development of the headwaters, a partially successful effort on their part. In 2008, the city worked with the Southeast Neighbors to purchase 40 acres of land from Joe Green for \$1.4 million. At this time, the Beverlys also offered to sell their land, but at a price of \$4 million, and the city decided not to purchase. The land known as the Beverly property is the last parcel of the Amazon headwaters with its fate undecided.

If the city of Eugene were to purchase the Beverly property, as it did with the Green property, it would most likely use funds from the 2006 Parks and Open Space bond measure, which is set aside specifically for acquiring or improving parks and natural areas and cannot be used for other purposes. The Southeast Neighbors estimate that a portion of land called the Deerbrook PUD property is worth approximately \$1 million, and while the property has not been appraised since before the housing crash, Matthews says that the Southeast Neighbors have offered to partner with the Beverlys for re-appraisal, which has not yet happened.

With Amazon Creek’s already dilapidated condition, paving the headwaters and building houses will impact the water quality further down. Proponents of conserving the Amazon headwaters argue that the headwaters represent a keystone area, crucial to retaining connectivity between watersheds and providing habitat to native plant and animal species.

Matthews, who is planning to run for the East Lane County commissioner position next year, says about 60 percent of water runoff in Eugene drains into Amazon Creek. “It really is the dominant native watershed of Eugene,” he says. “This is the last place where we could actually complete a habitat corridor between other preserved headwaters land and this greenway.”

In the 2003 Rivers to Ridges Vision plan, which lays out a framework for future parks and open spaces in the Eugene metro area, the headwaters are identified as a possible park and open space area, and the report lists their importance in terms of scenic quality, connectivity and habitat. Jeff Krueger, a principal member of the team responsible for the Rivers to Ridges plan, says that the closeness of the headwaters to the Ridgeline Trail System makes them a desirable candidate for preservation. “In general, the headwaters area was one of those key areas in that open space vision,” he says.

Building houses on the headwaters will be a big change for a landscape that has so far avoided urbanization. Over



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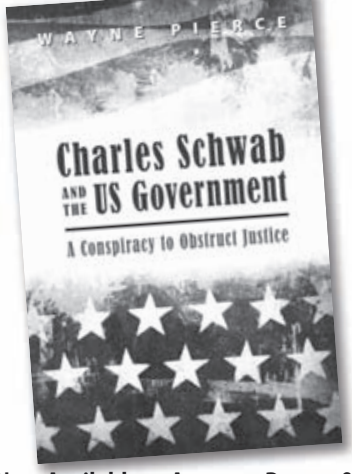
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