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Fruits of their labor

Earth-conscious group spreads sustainability message through music, planting trees

By [Katie Booth](#)

Michael Flynn swayed lightly from side to side in a rickety swing built for two. Resting in the shade of an old barn at the GRUB co-op, he stared out onto a caravan of brightly painted buses. Behind the caravan, green fields stretched out against a warm sky, and a breeze stirred the air, on the end of which summer could be tasted.

This was becoming his favorite spot, Flynn said.

From his vantage point, he looked out on the fellow members of the caravan, packing up in anticipation of the next town, the next group of kids.

“Every community has its own flavor,” Flynn said, and he certainly would know. In the course of 70 days, starting in the beginning of February, he and 24 other volunteers are traveling to 20 cities throughout California as part of the sixth annual Common Vision Fruit Tree Tour.

Earlier that morning, on April 1, Flynn got to know the flavor of Biggs by visiting Biggs Elementary and engaging 150 kids through the use of “green theater,” tree planting, drums and eco hip-hop. The day before, he and the other Common Vision-ers performed at Chico Country Day School.

“We inspire students to take care of the environment through actions in their own neighborhoods,” said Flynn, 29, Common Vision’s director of education and program development. For instance, by planting trees.



WHEELS OF GREEN

Common Vision’s Fruit Tree Tour bused a full crew into Chico last week for a morning of learning and planting trees.

Photo By Katie Booth

Common Vision online

Visit the group’s Web site for more information: www.commonvision.org.

Common Vision started up in 1999 as a nonprofit dedicated to raising awareness through education about the Earth and promoting sustainability. The Fruit Tree Tour, just one of Common Vision's programs, began in 2004, when 200 fruit trees were donated to the group. So began the mobile education program as a way to "touch the lives of diverse communities across wide areas," Flynn said. They especially seek to influence kids in lower-income schools.

The goal is to fuse arts with ecology, and environmental action with music, art and expression to form a message that can resonate with kids. The combination of all these things helps to make environmental care relevant to a wide range of communities. And it helps to pump kids up and teach them a valuable lesson, Flynn said.

"The environment isn't just polar bears and rainforests," it is your back yard, too, said Flynn, who graduated from Pomona College with a degree in education and sociology, and has been a member of Common Vision since 2002.

The Tour's "green theater" is a perfect example of blending art and ecology. At Chico Country Day last week, the group started off the day with 45 minutes of dazzling costumes and music that told the story of a group of time travelers from the year 2050. In 2050, the Earth is in bad shape, and through rap, drums, a live band, life-size puppets and a colorful storyline, the tour showed the kids how to avoid this terrible outcome, as they laughed and chanted along with the story. "Recycle. Walk. Ride your bike. Plant a tree!"

And the tour's members followed up "green theater" by practicing what they preach: planting fruit trees in the schoolyard. They also taught respect and cooperation through drumming with the kids, and held an "expression session," during which the students were encouraged to talk about changes they would like to see in their neighborhoods.

Flynn isn't the only one to praise the Tree Tour. Gina Sims, a garden coordinator for Chico Country Day School and health education specialist for Chico State's Center for Nutrition and Activity Promotion, which co-sponsored the visit, said she was "thrilled" with the result.

"I was so impressed with how organized, professional and kid-centered they were," Sims said. The tour also stopped in Paradise, at Evergreen Sixth Grade Academy.

One of the more interesting features of the Fruit Tree Planting Tour is their mode of transportation: Lioness, Bu, and Bassi, three buses powered by recycled vegetable grease from restaurants, and each with its own special amenities. Lioness has an organic kitchen and has traveled more than 100,000 miles on "homebrew biodiesel" and veggie oil. Bu boasts a 1,000-watt solar system, bamboo interior, an office and sleeping arrangements for eight. She also holds 100 drums, costumes and props for "green theater." Bassi provides solar and battery power for the mobile office and media center. "Fridgey" is a white moving van that convinces the fruit trees it is still the depth of winter, and keeps the veggie oil refrigerated to power the trip.

Altogether, they are a stunning fleet of environmental excellence.

But while the buses may be the fire keeping the tour on track, the heart of the effort is the group itself: an eclectic ensemble of volunteers assembled from around the country whose sole mission is to engage the hearts of students in environmental stewardship in their communities, Flynn said.

“In these topsy-turvy environmental times,” Flynn said with a laugh, he is just happy to “make bridges” and to engage himself in work that brings him joy every day.



ROOT CAUSE

Koral Delatierra gets ready to plant a tree with students.
photo by Katie Booth