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BAYVIEW

Yosemite Slough work earns environmental award for student

La Constance Shahid raises plants to be installed in \$20 million restoration

- Jan Goben, Chronicle Staff Writer

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La Constance Shahid holds an 8-inch-high potted coyote bush a few inches from her eyes, and sees a brighter future for Bayview-Hunters Point.

"The wetlands will be very beautiful, very green, with wildlife trails and a recreation area," Shahid says, pointing to Yosemite Slough, 34 acres of mudflats and dry, sandy land beyond where she stands -- land that has been slated for restoration to wetlands. "It'll be quiet. It'll be a place to go to hang out."

Environmental planners envision that someday the slough, which begins just north and east of Candlestick Park and extends to the south edge of Hunters Point Naval Shipyard and out to the bay, will have islands to protect birds from dogs and other animals and will include an extension of the Bay Trail, which will eventually wind throughout the Bay Area.

Shahid, 19, whose friends call her Connie, is the only Bay Area winner among seven young people nationwide of the Brower Youth Award for environmental activism this year. The award, which includes a \$3,000 prize, will be handed out next Friday at the Calvin Simmons Auditorium in Oakland, after the group returns from a camping trip to Yosemite. The award is named for the late David Brower, who founded the Earth Island Institute and helped create a growing conservation movement beginning in the 1950s.

Shahid's award, which she will use to pursue her college education, comes from her work in restoring Yosemite Slough. Each Saturday, she spends six hours at the Plants Gone Wild Nursery, on Carroll Avenue, next to the slough. She helps build plant beds and shelters, installs irrigations systems, and waters, trims and tends to plants that will be planted in the slough at the beginning of next year, after the area has been cleared of contaminants. The restoration is expected to take two to three years and cost \$20 million in grant money, most of which will go to toxic cleanup.

"Bayview-Hunters Point is surrounded by freeways, the Bayview Power Plant and the Naval Shipyard," said Shahid, a quiet young woman who smiles shyly as friends walk by.

"The air quality isn't that good in Bayview. There's a lot of asthma, cancer, birth defects. Wetlands areas have better air quality. I see this project as helping people."

The scent of basil wafts through the air and butterflies flit from plant to plant as Shahid walks among the 40 raised beds to water tomatoes, cucumbers and native California plants -- gum plants, Toyon plants, flannel bush -- stopping to pinch off a dry leaf or finger the soil to test its dampness. The community garden is tended by Bay Youth for the Environment, which uses grant money to hire young people, and by other members of the community who tend to their own plants in the beds.

"Connie, I think this tomato will be ready on Saturday," said Patrick Rump, program director of Bay Youth, walking past one of the garden boxes and hoisting a large, round tomato. "I'll save it for you."

Shahid, who grew up in Bayview and is now studying journalism as a sophomore at City College of San Francisco, didn't come by her interest in the environment until a few years ago.

"At first, I needed a job," said Shahid, about her work with Literacy for Environmental Justice (the umbrella organization for Bay Youth), beginning in her senior year of Phillip and Sala Burton Academic High School. "When I was a kid, I didn't really think about this kind of stuff. When I started working here ... is when I found out a lot about the environment."

Rump said, "I think Connie's attitude is the most impressive thing about her. She's always on time and always ready to go the extra distance."

"There were a number of things impressive about Connie," said Jason Salfi, program director of Brower Youth Awards, who said 150 people applied for the award this year. "She's a community leader. She really has a great rapport with her peers, which we see as really important for the future -- more and more people sharing values... She has a strong soul.

"She comes from an area with particular hardship. It's not easy to be an environmental activist in Bayview-Hunters Point. It takes a lot of vision and leadership to get things done in that type of an area."

To learn more

For more information about the Brower Youth Awards or about working at the Plants Gone Wild Nursery, visit www.lejyouth.org or www.earthisland.org/bya

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