

Don Pace/Optic photo

Peter Skelton has been at Memorial Middle School for the last three years teaching students how they can use nature's gifts to help save the environment, and at the same time, put what they've learned into practical use in the classroom.

Teaching lessons beyond the classroom

By **Don Pace**
Las Vegas Optic

Peter Skelton has been teaching at Memorial Middle School for the last three years, but the

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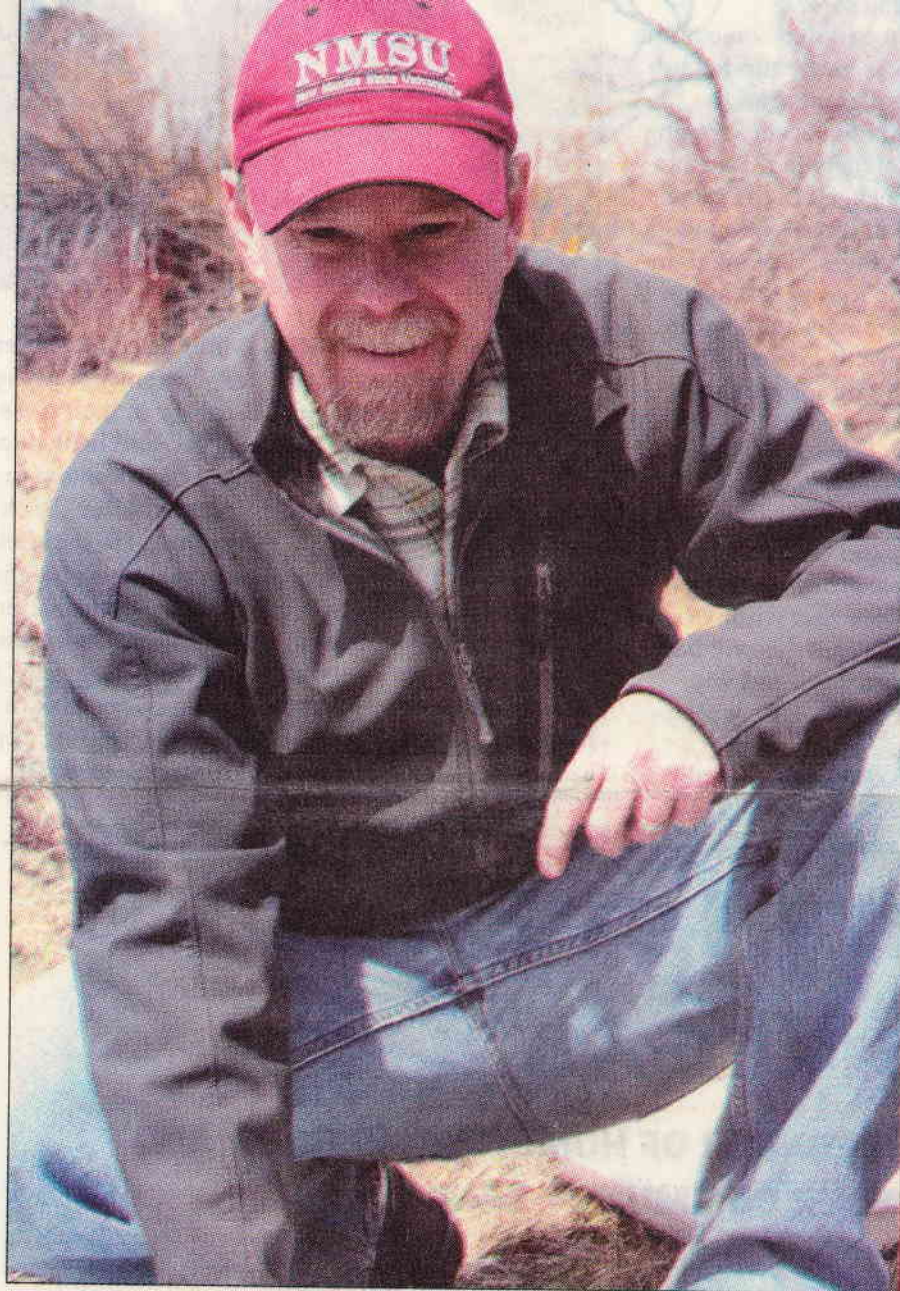
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Peter Skelton has been teaching at Memorial Middle School for the last three years, but the impact of his work doesn't stop at the campus door. His love for Mother Nature spills over into everything he does inside and outside the classroom.

Memorial Middle School Principal Sandra Madrid said, "He has become an integral part of our

school, he's a natural teacher, even though he's never taught before. He enjoys what he does and is always thinking of new ways to teach. He's never idle, never, and has become part of our family."

Madrid said Skelton has had a big influence on everyone around him, and he has shown his colleagues that there are different avenues available when it comes to teaching kids.

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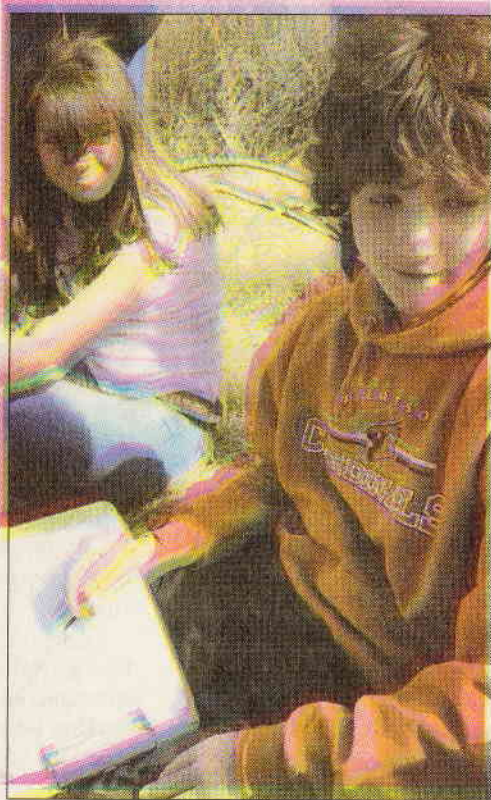
Lessons

From Page A1

"Sometimes I don't think students even realize that they are learning as they are measuring, digging, planting and harvesting, and most importantly every child, even those in wheelchairs, are involved in our green initiatives. He brings a vitality to our science and math curriculum and makes it interesting. We've got the greenhouse, the garden and then he dreamed up powering it all with solar power, and he keeps adding more and more to our program every day," Madrid said.

Skelton is a native of El Paso and studied for his master's degree at New Mexico State University; he went on to the University of Nebraska, where he earned a Ph.D. His background revolves around ecology and forestry.

"Teaching young people is new to me, but with almost three years under my belt, I'm feeling a little more experienced, and have just enjoyed the heck out of this job and really feel like we're having an



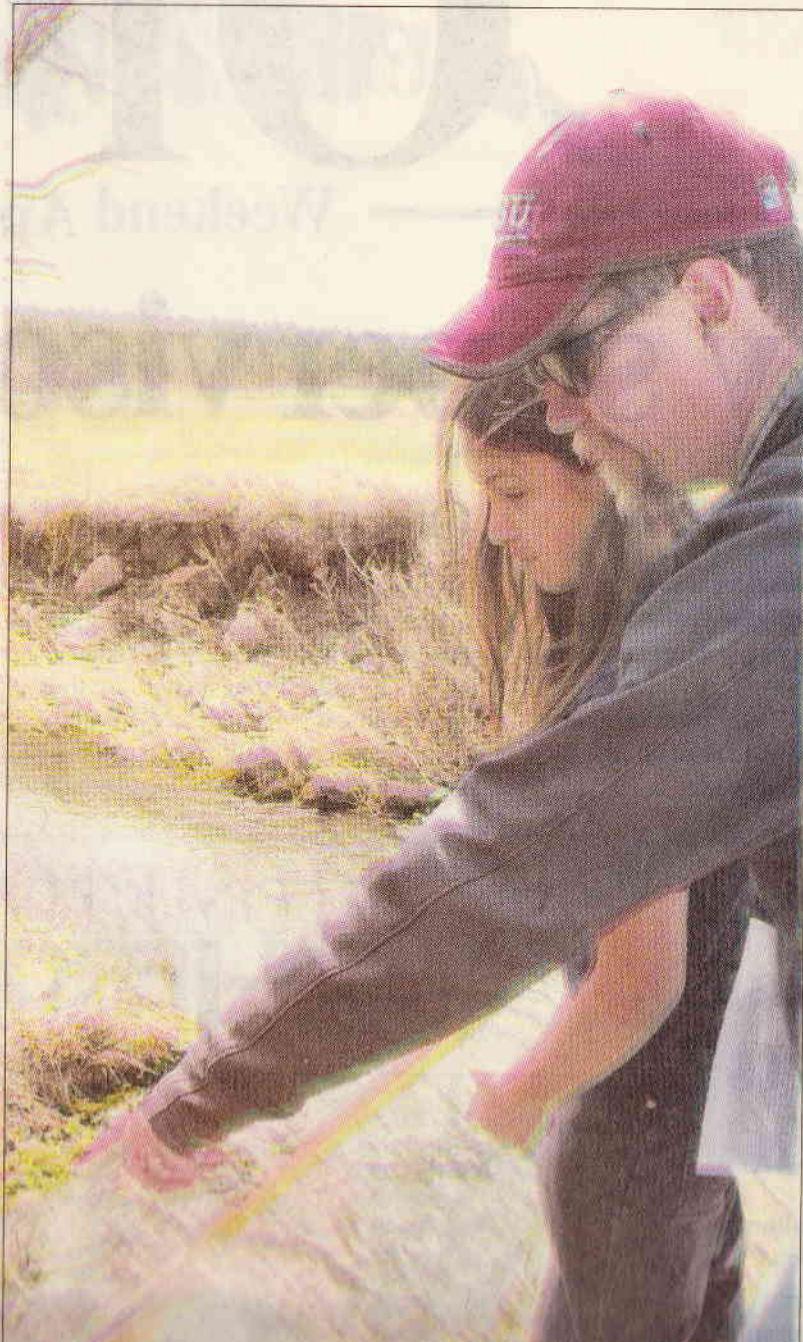
Memorial Middle School students Santana Aragon and Nathan L'Esperance and their seventh-grade classmates from Memorial Middle School learn about beaver ecology, forestry and riparian habitat during an ecology field trip to the Pritzlaff Ranch west of Sapello.

One of Skelton's objectives is to partner and network with other like-minded organizations, and introduce students to what different organizations in the community are doing in the areas of restoration of vegetation, wildlife and water projects around Las Vegas.

On this day, Memorial Middle School seventh-graders are looking at ways various organizations are contributing to the preservation of vital

ranchers could undertake. Things like thinning forests, so they become healthy again. We are also engaged in riparian restoration that includes planting shrubs and trees along the Sapello River, and erosion prevention," Grogan said.

Grogan said some of the work is partly funded by federal grants and the foundation is encouraging landowners in the area to get engaged in the same kind of conservation work



Teacher Peter Skelton and Memorial Middle School student **Brandon Maes** look for waterborne creatures that inhabit and make for a healthy ecosystem in the streams west of Sapello.

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Memorial Middle School learn about beaver ecology, forestry and riparian habitat during an ecology field trip to the Pritzlaff Ranch west of Sapello.

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"Teaching young people is new to me, but with almost three years under my belt, I'm feeling a little more experienced, and have just enjoyed the heck out of this job and really feel like we're having an impact on getting kids excited about science, math, engineering and technology," Skelton said.

Skelton is one of those people who think things like composting, seeing wriggling worms and budding tomatoes are the most exciting things in life, and his students seem to get it. For a moment they forget about the latest hip-hop song or what their friends are texting, and seem to absorb Skelton's message, that learning can be fun.

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On this day, Memorial Middle School seventh-graders are looking at ways various organizations are contributing to the preservation of vital resources in the area. Sterling Grogan, project manager for the Biophilia Foundation, gave kids an overview of ecological restoration taking place at the Pritzlaff Ranch west of Sapello.

"The foundation purchased the Pritzlaff Ranch from the Nature Conservancy in 1999 with the intent of promoting biological diversity on privately owned lands to demonstrate various kinds of conservation that other

ranchers could undertake. Things like thinning forests, so they become healthy again. We are also engaged in riparian restoration that includes planting shrubs and trees along the Sapello River, and erosion prevention," Grogan said.

Grogan said some of the work is partly funded by federal grants and the foundation is encouraging landowners in the area to get engaged in the same kind of conservation work.

"A big part of the foundation's work is to reconnect humans with nature, and we feel it's most important for humans to be reconnected with nature are kids. So our emphasis is to make the ranch available to groups of school kids, and today this is the largest group we've had. We hope that within a couple of years this will be a routine thing and will have students here regularly," Grogan said.

Skelton also brought



Teacher Peter Skelton and Memorial Middle School student **Brandon Maes** look for water-borne creatures that inhabit and make for a healthy ecosystem in the streams west of Sapello.

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together forest scientist Kit Reid, who oversees the New Mexico Forestry and Watershed Restoration Institute, whose offices are on the Highlands University campus; Richard Schrader with River Source; and Lea Knutson at the Citizens Watershed Monitoring Team to spend the day at the 10,000-acre living classroom.

Skelton said Memorial

Middle School students are currently studying ecology in their classrooms, and he wanted to give them context to the content of their book learning. He said field trips like this give the students an appreciation of what it means to restore an area ecologically, followed by the task of monitoring the results of the hard work evolved.

Skelton, and his wife of 14 years, Patti, share similar interests; she works with the state Forestry and Watershed Restoration Institute.

Speaking of family, principal Madrid said, "He's going to become a daddy at the end of April and everyone at the school is very excited and happy for a guy that everybody loves."