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Project allows Piedmont students learn about diseases, to diagnose them

By Rob Peecher
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MONTICELLO - Students in Missy Wilson's science classes may soon be diagnosing diseases of fish in Honduras or problems with crops on local farms.

Last week, the students at Piedmont Academy got involved in a unusual project that combines the resources of a private university in Honduras, the University of Georgia and UGA's Cooperative Extension Service.

Wilson said the project is intended to give her students experience in a practical application of science, rather than just reading about it in their school books.

"I think it's just so much more exciting to do the science than to do section reviews (from textbooks) and vocabulary words," Wilson said. "This gets them interested in science, excited about it, more than just memorizing and then forgetting."

The program utilizes digital imaging equipment - a microscope that captures digital images and digital cameras - to send images of diseased plants or animals from one location to another. Extension offices throughout Georgia are using the equipment to more rapidly diagnose problems farmers are experiencing with crops.

At Piedmont Academy, the students will use the equipment first to learn about the various diseases that affect plants and animals and then to have some actual hands-on experience in diagnosing problems. The school's 4-H Aquaculture Club is working with Zamorano University in Honduras, where the university is raising tilapia, a kind of fish, to learn about diagnosing diseases among fish.

This month, the school is using equipment on loan from UGA, but a donor is providing the school with \$6,000 worth of equipment that it will use to continue the program, Wilson said. The school's involvement in the program emerged from a conversation Wilson had with Jasper County's Extension agent, Jean Walter.

"We were talking about how little the students remember when they leave the classroom," Wilson said. "We wanted to do something that would make them realize how exciting science is and how fun it is. If we can get them interested in it and excited about it, the learning will come."

Some students may also have the opportunity to attend the World Aquaculture Society meeting in Honolulu next year to present the work they have been doing.

Elysse Lewandowski, a junior at Piedmont Academy and a member of the aquaculture club, said the ability to communicate with university students in Honduras is fascinating to her.

"It's a world full of help," Lewandowski said. "We help them, and they help us. If they have a fish that died, we can try to help them diagnose what happened. If we have a problem, we can send them a picture and they can help."

Lewandowski said the project increases her interest, not only in science, but also in technology through the use of the computers, microscopes and scanners.

Andrew Lankford, also a junior at Piedmont and a member of the aquaculture club, said communicating with students at a foreign school and being involved in a one-of-a-kind project with UGA is exciting.

"We get to see animals and different kinds of plants - I think everybody's pretty excited about it," Lankford said.

Friday, students examined a small snake one of Wilson's students found and a diseased leaf from a pecan tree another student brought in from a local pecan orchard. As the students get further into the program, Wilson said they will develop the ability to diagnose diseases themselves.

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