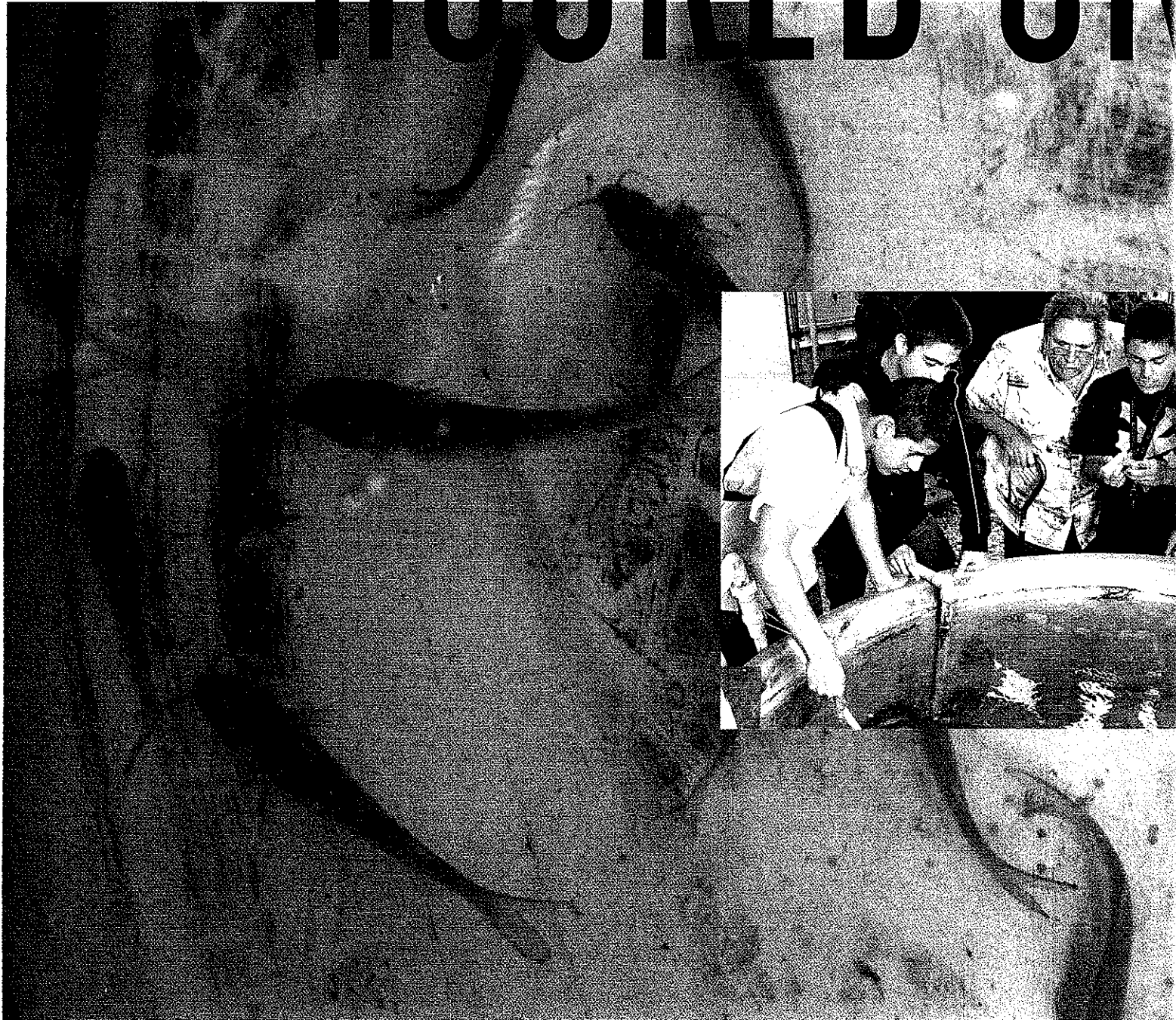


HOOKEED UP



Bill Callahan (center) has his students test the acidity of Watsonville High School's fish tanks. Waste from the tanks is used as fertilizer for the school's adjacent flower garden. Now that's sustainable!

FISH

BILL CALLAHAN '95, has always had his hands in the ocean. As part of a "fishy" after-school program he created, science students at Watsonville High School are getting their own hands wet, too.

"We're in the business of killing fish," says Callahan. It's his tongue-in-cheek way of explaining a program that introduces students to both the science and business of catfish farming. Students in grades 10 through 12 raise the catfish and then market and sell them to local restaurants and retailers. That means caring for the fish and maintaining the four gurgling, algae-coated tanks in the school courtyard.

A Watsonville High science teacher for 12 years, Callahan also knows a thing or two about fish. Aptly nicknamed Bill the Oyster Man, he ran a business farming and serving up oysters for more than 20 years before going back to school to get a teaching credential at San José State. Still, he's new to raising catfish and has made "a million mistakes." He thinks that's the fun part.

"Not knowing all the answers means the students have to look up what they want to know," he says. "All of a sudden they're not asking why they have to do math or understand chemistry anymore. They're just learning."

Reeling them in

Censured for low academic achievement this year, Watsonville High struggles to keep its 2,200 students focused on learning. Callahan's catfish farm, which began in fall 2008, is

among the programs and activities that keep students school-minded.

"Fish is the hook," explains Callahan, standing outside the program's chain-link fence enclosed courtyard. His 35 student-farmers calculate how much to feed the fish—too much, and the program loses money, too little and the fish will die. They also solve problems like keeping fish from getting swallowed by the tank's drain.

"Mr. Callahan lets us be very hands-on," says Brando Sencion, a junior who plans to major in business when he gets to college. "I like being able to go outside to hold the fish and see how big they are."

Callahan says his own fascination with raising ocean creatures began at Humboldt State University, where he got a bachelor's degree in oceanography. When a professor asked him to figure out how deep to make a pond where salmon and crab could be raised together, he was hooked. (The answer is 2.5 feet, by the way.)

Teaching the students how to solve problems and getting them invested in a long-term project keeps them connected to their education. "A lot of times when kids leave here each day, school is out of their minds," says Callahan. "As a teacher, I need to help them go places."

Teach a person to fish...

For many Watsonville High students, going places means going to work—often before finishing high school—which can delay or spoil college plans. Brando Sencion is a ride operator at the Santa Cruz beach boardwalk, for example, and Hans Mifflin, another junior in the program, does landscaping with his uncle.

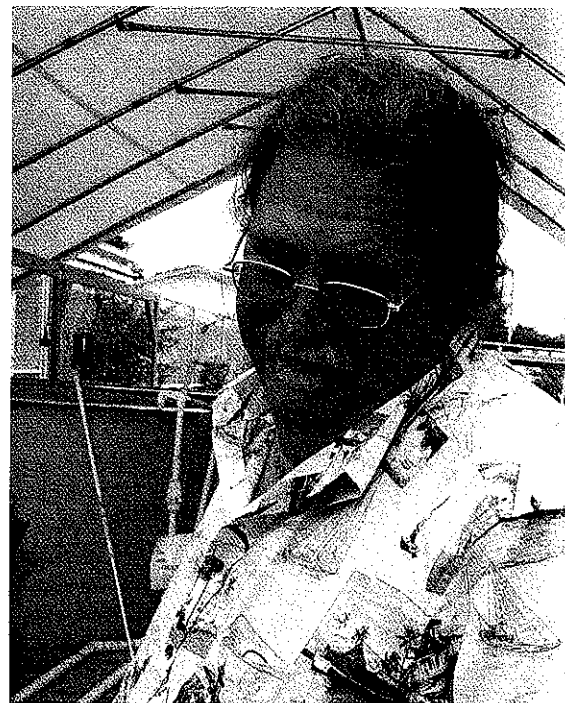
"Being in the program helps me stay in touch with what I have to do in school and keeps me on track," says Mifflin, who would

like to be a history teacher one day. He knows education can have a hefty price tag, but says he'll work until he can pay for college.

Scrubbing the algae from the four large tanks and listening to Callahan's oyster-business stories won't keep students from having to work through high school and college, but it does teach them that learning and earning money can go hand in hand. Profits from the catfish farm will sustain the program, support other Watsonville High activities and provide college funding to participating students.

While having a profitable business will be exciting, teaching students how to learn is what really matters, says Callahan. "Don't set limits on kids," he cautions. "If you give students the right tools, they will do incredible things." ♦

—Jody Ulate, '05



At San José State, Callahan "learned about service from teachers who work in the community."