

Man cultivates, shares love for butterflies

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By ALLEN HOUSTON / The Dallas Morning News

Students at Reilly Elementary in Dallas hold their breath as the miracle of life unfolds in front of them. A group of third-graders crowd a picnic table in the school's garden as a monarch butterfly pokes its head from a dark chrysalis and fights out of the cocoon.

Children and parents utter "oohs" and "ahhs" as the butterfly unfurls its wet wings and perches on the withered cocoon's husk.

A new life enters the world, and though he has seen it a thousand times before, Tony Delia watches as raptly as everyone else.

"There's nothing like seeing the look of amazement on someone's face when they watch a butterfly emerge from a chrysalis for the first time," Mr. Delia said.

Spreading the gospel of his favorite insect to students is a personal mission of the Lake Highlands resident, known as the Butterfly Guy. He has borne witness to the life-and-death struggle of nature's most celebrated insect since he was a child.

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JIM MAHONEY/DMN
Butterfly season is aflutter with activity for Lake Highlands resident Tony Delia, also known as the Butterfly Guy. In addition to raising the insects in his garden, he lectures local students about the wonders of the butterfly's life cycle.

"I spent my whole childhood chasing butterflies because I was amazed by their beauty," Mr. Delia said. "I was fascinated by their flight, and I always longed for the freedom that they have."

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VIDEO [Meet the Butterfly Guy](#)

With spring's arrival comes butterfly season, and that means Mr. Delia will be chained to his garden and the school lecture circuit until the first frost of November. He'll also spend that time raising the insects, which he sells to schools, flower shops and others.

Tending to his flock

Cattle growers have ranches. Mr. Delia has his backyard.

There, he flutters about his butterfly enclosure covered in caterpillars and brightly colored orange, black and yellow butterflies.

He picks a lazy monarch off a milkweed plant and puts it in his mouth. The butterfly's wings poke out like a sewing needle between his lips, until he moves the plant across the enclosure and places the insect gently back on the plant.

Dozens of plastic containers filled with eggs line a wall of his home. When the eggs hatch into caterpillars, he will take them to the enclosure where they will have their fill of milkweed plants before forming a pupa. It is these cocoons that Mr. Delia sells and shows.

The idea of selling chrysalises came to him five years ago at the salon where he works as a cosmetologist.

"I kept a chrysalis on my desk, and whenever one of the butterflies emerged everyone would come over and look," he said. "That was when I realized how much people enjoyed butterflies."

His butterfly haven is filled with a hovering swarm of monarchs, black swallow tails, gulf fritillaries and five other varieties of butterflies. Every spare inch of Mr. Delia's yard is used to raise plants that his butterflies can eat.

Mr. Delia, 40, studied butterflies in the 1990s at the knee of Dale Clark, co-founder of the Dallas County Lepidopterists Society. A lepidopterist studies butterflies or moths.

Mr. Delia's mentor lives in southern Dallas County, where he raises more than 50 native Texas butterfly species for large exhibits and zoos. On an average week, more than 1,000 butterflies are born on his farm.

"Butterflies are the ambassadors to the insect world," Mr. Clark said. "They're pretty, they're harmless, and watching them come into the world makes you slow down and pay closer attention to how fascinating life is."

Mr. Clark rarely speaks to schools and doesn't sell his butterflies to the public.

Spreading knowledge

Sharing the knowledge he learned about butterflies with children drives Mr. Delia away from his garden.

Recently, at Hyer Elementary in the Highland Park school district, he took a barrage of questions from a classroom gathered around a table full of monarch butterflies.

"Do you name your butterflies?" third-grader Sam Welfelt asked, hand pointing eagerly in the air.

Mr. Delia, wearing khaki garb akin to TV's *Crocodile Hunter*, smiled while addressing the classroom.

"Why don't we give them some names right now," he said.

A quick consensus was reached, and three monarchs were christened Sammy, Murray and Fred.

After the lecture, students follow the Butterfly Guy out to a courtyard where he allowed them to free the monarchs. "That was awesome," Adam Shiffer, 8, said as the butterflies disappeared in a cloud over the school roof and into the brilliant blue spring sky.

Four years ago when Mr. Delia started volunteering as a tutor at Reilly Elementary, his neighborhood school, he helped create the school's annual fall butterfly sale fundraiser. Mr. Delia donates the chrysalises sold at the event, and proceeds are used for maintaining the school's garden.

Mr. Delia sells his chrysalises in flower shops, including Cebolla Fine Flowers, I Love Flowers and Avant Garden in the Highland Park Shopping Village. The chrysalises go for \$35 to \$55.

"When we started carrying them, we didn't know how they were going to sell," said Haile Wossen, designer at Avant Garden. "But they've done so well that now we have a back list for them."

Mr. Wossen said butterflies are popular gifts for parents to buy their children and for holidays such as Mother's Day. Though the season just started, Mr. Delia has already sold more than 200 butterfly cocoons. Last year, he sold more than 800.

Tracy Munselle purchased a chrysalis for her son Brandon and has added plants to make her garden butterfly-friendly.

"Awe-inspiring is the only word for it," she said. "It's very peaceful and educational for the kids watching the chrysalis darken and then the butterfly's wings rolling out. Once the wings harden, we take the butterfly outside and watch it fly away."

Mr. Delia said people also give the chrysalises to cancer patients and friends who have lost loved ones.

"I think that it's a metaphor for life and starting over again," he said. "It's a way to take a tragic event and provide some hope and the idea of a new beginning."

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BUTTERFLY FACTS

Butterflies see red, green and yellow.

There are roughly 24,000 species of butterflies in the world.

The monarch butterfly migrates more than 2,000 miles between southern Canada and Mexico.

The top butterfly speed is 12 miles per hour.

A butterfly's average life span is two weeks.

A lepidopterist is a scientist who studies butterflies or moths.

Butterflies cling to the underneath of leaves or between rocks or tall blades of grass to sleep.

Butterflies can't fly if their body temperature is less than 86 degrees.

The oldest representations of butterflies are painted Egyptian frescoes in Thebes that are 3,500 years old.

Antarctica is the only continent with no butterflies.

SOURCE: www.thebutterflysite.com/facts.shtml

Online at: http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/news/city/richardson/stories/DN-butterflyguy_20met.ART.North.Edition1.39369b4.html