Episcopal Ents, trees on first name basis

"Cursa him, root and branch! Many of these trees were my friends, creatures I had known from nut and acorn; many had voices of their own that are lost for ever now. And there are wastes of stump and bramble where once there were singing groves. I have been idle. I have let things slip. It must stop!"

By ANGELA SIMONEAUX
Acadiana bureau

CADE — Like the Tolkien characters who talk to the trees and care for them as shepherds care for sheep, the Ents of the Episcopal School of Acadiana are on a first-name basis with the live oaks that grace their rural campus.

The stately trees are named after pillars of the Episcopal Church — Henry VIII, Queen Elizabeth, Bishop Polk, John Dunne. Although many in Louisiana take the huge trees for granted, the Ents have not.

"It's not enough just to love the trees and make sure they aren't cut down, the students explain. "We have an absolutely gorgeous campus, and the trees are a vital part of that," says senior Erin Shew. "Without the trees, we wouldn't have the same atmosphere."

The Ents are trying to get all their fellow students to think about the trees, she said. "We want them to realize how important the trees are, and how important it is to care for them," Shew said.

Senior Rachel Reed agreed. "We're trying to preserve the trees," she said. "They're part of ESA as a whole, and we need to keep them up and plant new ones."

On a recent brisk morning, the Ents were reintroducing Spanish moss to a couple of live oaks on the fringe of the campus.

Science teacher Jon Himel was explaining that the moss and the trees have a symbiotic relationship.

Under Himel's supervision, the students have been working to take better care of the trees on campus. "Root damage is the biggest problem for urban trees," Himel says. "People tend to ignore the part of the tree they don't see: the roots."

Boardwalks and elevated common areas keep student feet off the roots, and mulch helps keep the soil from getting compacted, Himel explains.

"We mulched where there was a lot of traffic," he says. "It's better for the trees, and the ground is not as impacted."

To combat already packed soil, the Ents have dug holes around the roots and filled them with loose material and fertilizer, to help aerate the soil and bring nutrients to the roots, Himel says.

Last fall, the Ents planted a large number of donated live oaks on the campus. The work of the Ents is making a difference, he says. "It's been a big improvement for the trees," he says.

It's not just the upper classmen who are taking part, he adds. "We have a lot of participation from the middle school students," Himel says.

ESAs have taken tree preservation into consideration in its future plans, says Tori Guidry, a development coordinator for the school. A campaign is under way now to fund a master plan for the expansion of the school. That expansion makes changes in the campus for the trees, Guidry says.

A driveway lined with oaks is being closed to vehicles, and all parking lots are being moved away from the trees, she explains.

All the buildings are being moved out, to give students more green space, she says. The walkways will still be elevated, and the commons area also will remain elevated, to give the trees more space, she says.

The three-phase plan includes a new chapel, underground utilities, renovations to the gymnasium, new classrooms and a new commons area. The plan carefully notes the location of every existing tree, and makes room for more than 50 new shade trees and more than a dozen new flowering trees.

"As you can see, trees are very important to our school," Guidry says.