

Stream of Dreams

Joan Carne and Louise Towell use fish murals to teach communities about the importance of our waterways.

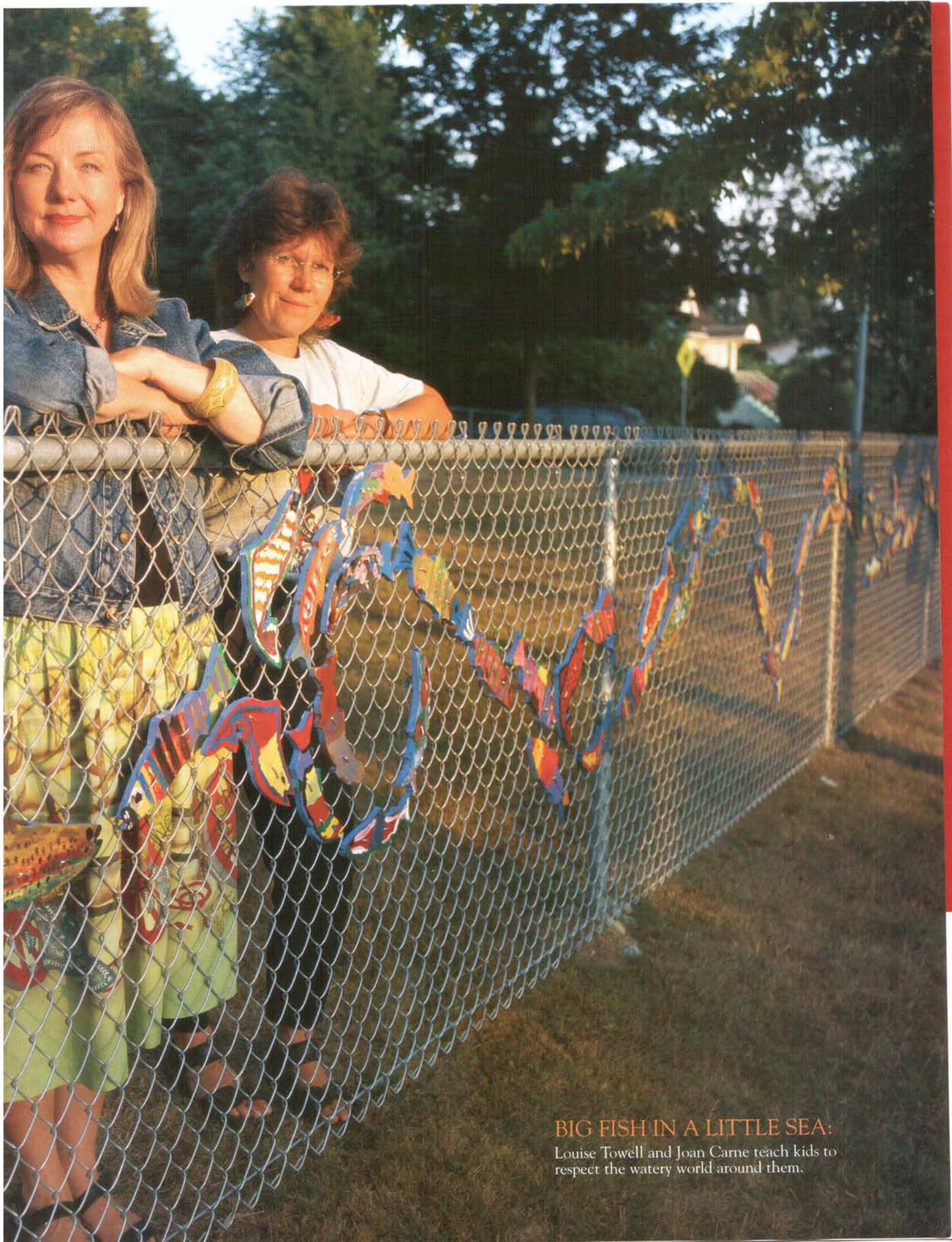
Joan Carne scrambles over mossy stones and gravel in the trickling waters of Byrne Creek outside of Vancouver, BC. Her socks, peeking out of sandals, are getting wet. She crouches and points to a tiny cutthroat trout resting at the bottom of the ankle-high stream. "The creek is very much alive now," she says, "last year there were 72 adult salmon."

That was a giant improvement over the sight that greeted visitors to Byrne Creek on July 26, 1998. Thousands of fish floated dead along the fern-shrouded waterway, poisoned by a noxious substance someone had poured down a storm-sewer drain.

Carne and her partner, Louise Towell, want to make sure nothing like that ever happens again. They have developed the Stream of Dreams, a children's art project that teaches kids and parents to respect the waters that surround them.

In June, the pair took the project to Burquitlam Elementary School in a quiet Vancouver suburb to educate children how storm drains are connected to waterways where fish and other creatures live. As Carne brandished a card-





BIG FISH IN A LITTLE SEA:
Louise Towell and Joan Carne teach kids to respect the watery world around them.



board model of a storm drain, fish earrings bounced beneath her ears. "Oil from cars comes off the street and gets into the drains and so does soap when people wash their cars," she tells the students ranging in age from kindergarten to Grade 8. "Storm drains shouldn't receive anything but rainwater."

Later, the children gathered around art tables, each receiving a wooden fish. Towell, in a paint-splattered apron, guided small hands in their choice of paint. "The fish and the Stream of Dreams will be a reminder that water is in their lives and they should take care of it."

Towell came up with the idea for Stream of Dreams with her daughter, Chanel Lapierre. They saw a community art project in Vancouver where paintings decorated a chain-link fence. Lapierre, who was just nine at the time, suggested they do something similar in the Edmonds area of Burnaby where they lived.

Towell had grown up there with three siblings, a tugboat captain dad and a hairdresser mom, when it was a vibrant working-class neighbourhood. She left home at 19 and soon found work designing product displays for Eaton's, the department store. She married, had a daughter and moved to the seaside community of Crescent Beach in Surrey. In 1996, Towell, her husband and daughter returned to the family home to be with her aging mother and it was then that Towell discovered the Edmonds neighbourhood was no longer the friendly place she remembered from her childhood.

On the corner of Kingsway and Edmonds Street, just two blocks away, a tavern had been demolished. Its concrete remnants were covered with graffiti, litter and weeds. Shoppers who used to push carts of groceries from a now-defunct Safeway across the street were gone. In their place lingered sad-looking hookers and scruffy young men with the pink shine of needle tracks on their arms.

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At the same time, Carne lived across the tracks — the SkyTrain tracks in a more upscale area of Burnaby. Originally from Minnesota, she entered the University of British Columbia in 1974 to pursue a Master's degree in geology. She fell in love with the province and a classmate. After eight years of parting each summer so that Carne, wearing "gumboots and rain gear," could do mapping and mineral exploration in Washington state, Alaska, BC and the Yukon, the married couple settled down just a block from Byrne Creek.

When the fish in the creek died, Carne was furious. She joined the Byrne Creek Streamkeepers and became its chair. Like Towell, Carne was alarmed about the Kingsway corner, for buried beneath the war-like rubble of the tavern was the upper part of the Byrne Creek watershed.

Meanwhile, Towell and Lapierre would walk by the intersection and say, "It looks so ugly." But when they talked about the best part of the neighbourhood, they decided it was the creek. "It was a little piece of sanity in this area that was screaming for help," Towell said. Combining the idea of an art project with the tragic poisoning, Towell envisioned a fence adorned with wooden fish.

With drawings and the \$2,000 she had persuaded the owner of the Kingsway property to donate, Towell approached Carne. In May 2000, the Stream of Dreams partnership was born. While the women worked part-time for small fees from the schools they visited, the project — soon to be registered as a non-profit organization — quickly became a full-time job.

Their first fish fence was at the Kingsway corner. The environmentalists have since presented the Stream of Dreams in 25 British Columbia schools and even took 400 wooden fish to decorate a site in Ottawa this past spring.

At Burquitlam School, a week after the school's painting session, Carne and Towell gathered with parent volunteers to attach the wooden fish to the chain-link fence that separates the playground from Stoney Creek, a creek alive with salmon and trout.

It was an occasion made even more significant by the fact that the school was closing this summer because of declining enrolment.

"It will always be a memory for us," says Colleen Sipila, whose daughter painted a fish.

And if those memories flood back every time they see a storm drain, then Towell, Carne and their Stream of Dreams will have achieved success. ■