

PIGEON MESSAGING IS ACADEMIC

As shared by Mike Garrett, Sonoma County RPC

High school senior, Evan Alcantar, needed a project for his senior year project. In Evan's project proposal, he shared his fascination with the homing pigeons: how they know where home is from miles away. He knew about the housing needed for the birds, and he knew about taking the pigeons farther and farther from home to help them learn the landmarks, but he didn't have any experience in raising or caring for the pigeons. So he devised the mentor-supervised project of pigeon messaging.

He enlisted the expertise of AU member, Mike Garrett. Mike flies with the Sonoma County Racing Pigeon Club and Bay Cities Combine, in the San Francisco Bay area. He's had pigeons off and on since he was twelve years old. Now he is a retired Tugboat Captain and club Race Secretary and Treasurer. He took a break from the pigeons for work and family, but came back to the hobby in 2001. He makes the SOC club his home.

To assist with Evan's project, Mike taught Evan for three months, after school and on weekends, with a project goal of a pigeon who is trained to send messages from point A to point B in a reasonable amount of time at distances of 50 miles. Evan learned about the housing for the birds. He learned about pedigrees and registration of the homing pigeons. Mike guided him in care, feeding, training and management. He devoted 5 hours to raising; 5 hours to training and 10 hours on tracking the time from point A to point B. Evan utilized Mike's house and another house far enough away that the pigeon had a challenging task.

To satisfy the 20 hours for the education/training portion, Evan went to Mike's house after school. First, Mike had Evan build a small pigeon loft. It was a good size for young birds: 6 X 8 with a sloped roof. Mike supplied the babies and the food and grit. Evan was responsible for the care of the birds and the loft in his after school visits.

To learn about messaging, Mike provided yearlings. They used the races to serve as point A and point B was Mike's house. They started with short tosses. Evan recorded the latitude and longitude at 10 miles away from Mike's house, and of Mike's house itself. They would let the birds go and when they clocked in, Evan recorded that information.

Evan still needed to round out his experience more, so he went to two club shipping nights to see how it was done. He made notes and took pictures. With all this information, he will make packets with information about messaging in history and how the messaging service turned into pigeon racing.

This will be coupled with his experience of visiting Mike's loft and working through the banding process, pairing the breeders, egg laying and hatching of the eggs.

Mike provided several pigeon health books to read. Evan covered quite a lot of information in a short period of time.

This project will culminate when Evan takes two pigeons from Mike's house to the school early morning for release. Mike obtained message capsules from JEDDs. Secret words will be placed in

the capsules, and once the pigeons get back home to Mike's, Mike will retrieve the capsules and then make two phone calls and say the secret words from each capsule. Evan will have a map and a topographical view of Mike's house to illustrate the pigeons' flight paths to the school panel in his final presentation.

Every senior in California is required to complete some sort of project using a process like this. The array of project topics is limitless and according to the senior's interests and hobbies.

Evan was asked how in the world he ended up selecting a topic such as messaging by homing pigeon. He explained that he was on a hike in the woods one day with his class. They were instructed to use their cell phones for picture taking only, not communicating. But of course everyone was on their phone. That made Evan think – what would we do if we didn't have cell phones in the woods. And it occurred to him: we would have to use homing pigeons.

