Prof wants to spend furlough time in schools

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A University of Georgia professor wants to turn his lemon of an unpaid furlough day into “LemonAid” by recruiting fellow professors to join him as he volunteers in public schools that day.

So far, nearly 30 professors have signed up to spend time in area high, middle and elementary schools April 30, said Ron Orlando, a researcher with UGA’s Complex Carbohydrate Center and the volunteer effort’s chief organizer.

They’re calling the day LemonAid - an accidental name Orlando gave it when he sent an e-mail to colleague Mark Farmer, explaining why they might as well take the lemons of unpaid furlough days and make lemonade.

Except Orlando, an analytical chemist, spelled it “lemonaid.”

Farmer thought the name was perfect, however, recalling historic volunteer efforts and concerts like Live Aid and Farm Aid, which raised money for relief in Ethiopia and for family farms.

Farmer, head of the UGA department of cellular biology, also thought volunteering in local schools would be a great thing to do on the furlough day.

“Some will obviously use it as an unpaid holiday. But I thought this was a great way of demonstrating to taxpayers and the community that University of Georgia staff and faculty are really constructive community members,” he said.

Farmer is gearing up to go to a couple of schools that Friday with a show he’s done in the past, “Mr. Microscope.”

Richard Steet, an assistant professor of biochemistry and molecular biology, plans to take some of the zebrafish he works with on his volunteer stints.

Steet uses the fish in his research, which aims to understand better how some inherited diseases develop.

UGA scientists in general don’t do a good job of reaching out to the community - but LemonAid will help remedy that, said another faculty volunteer, Lance Wells.
“All of the grant money that runs all of our research - that comes from taxpayers. We work for the American taxpayer, so I think it's important to get (the research) out there,” said Wells, who seeks to understand the biochemistry of diseases such as congenital muscular dystrophy and Type 2 diabetes.

Wells doesn’t yet know what his school program will be. He plans to consult with his sons, students at Whit Davis Elementary School.

Orlando, a founder of the biotech startup company BioInquire, first conceived of the volunteer effort last fall as he listened to other professors complaining. They had just learned they’d have to take six days off without pay this academic year - and as a result, lose about 3 percent of their pay.

“I was sitting there at a faculty senate meeting, and people were saying things like, ‘We need to protest,’” Orlando recalled.

But Orlando was thinking something else: “I want to take this negative energy and turn it positive. I’ll bet we could volunteer our time.”

Orlando thought through his idea back in September, he said.

But when he looked at local school schedules, he realized that the idea just wouldn’t work for the first five of UGA workers’ six scheduled furlough days. On each of those first five furlough days, area schools were on break.

Orlando had signed up 28 volunteers as of Tuesday, several of them fellow scientists with labs at UGA’s Complex Carbohydrate Research Center, where Orlando works. He hopes to sign up at least 50 UGA faculty members for LemonAid.

“It’s all fun and games. It might have some long-lasting benefits, and it’s not costing anybody anything,” Orlando said.

Anyone interested in volunteering can contact Orlando at uga4edu@gmail.com or (706) 542-4429.