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## **Almaden Country School students donate books to fire-ravaged school**

By Patti Wolf  
*Staff Writer*

When students in Barbara Spencer's third grade class at Almaden Country School heard a fire had destroyed the library and seven classrooms at Gardner Academy in San Jose, they could understand and sympathize.

Eight of those students were entering the early childhood program at Country School in 1999 when an electrical fire destroyed their classrooms.

"The same thing happened to us and we wanted to make them feel better," said Country School third grader Drew Fryhoff.

"We wanted to do something really special," added classmate Ashley Smith. "We decided to collect books."

Two months after they began their collection, the 15 Country School students took more than 500 books and dozens of notebooks, crayons, markers, stickers, rulers and glue sticks to Gardner Academy, near Willow Glen, on Tuesday.

Gardner's library aide Diana Dahlin likened the visit to a Phoenix, who rises out of the ashes. "This is such heart-filled generosity," she said.

"We wanted to show the students that a lot of us care," said Country School teacher Spencer.

Since the Nov. 22 arson fire that caused more than \$4 million in damage, Gardner has received many donations from schools and individuals, but the visit from the Almaden Country School students was the first time a class personally brought its donation, said Francisca Vargas, the reading resource teacher at Gardner.

"This has been very healing for our students," said Vargas, who has taught various grades in her 17 years at Gardner and lost everything except her kindergarten materials in the fire. "They haven't met a group of children who have gone through the same experience."

Seeing the school, with its walled-off hulking frame in what once was the center of campus, and meeting Gardner's three third grade classes, now housed in portables, made a lasting impression on the students.

"The school looked scary from the fire," Almaden Country student Erini Tsatalos said, a sentiment many of her classmates echoed.

Gardner looked “kind of small,” the Almaden students noted, but it also has some elements their school doesn’t have—a two-story building and a cafeteria.

The Gardner students “looked happy when we presented them with the books,” Country School student Kaitlyn Sutton said. Her classmates nodded.

“It makes such a difference when the students can see each other and make a direct link,” Gardner library aide Dahlin said.

The Country School students also noticed many similarities between their class and the classes they visited. Jessica Rosenberg’s third-fourth combination class was reading “The Mouse and the Motorcycle,” a favorite of many of the Country School students. In another class, copies of another favorite book, “Charlotte’s Web,” lay on many of the desks.

“This is part of reaching out to the community and establishing a community,” said Spencer.

Country School students were anxious to deliver their gift and meet Gardner students. “I couldn’t sleep last night, I was so excited,” Country School student Tsatalos said.

Boxes were filled with a variety of books, many of the students’ favorites, from the “Magic School Bus” series, to Dr. Seuss and Beverly Cleary and the nonfiction “Discovery” series. Morgan Matsuo picked out a few favorites from the “Puppy Patrol” series. Harris Loundy selected a volume from the “Magic Tree House” series. Teacher Barbara Spencer’s selection, “A Series of Unfortunate Events,” seemed especially appropriate.

She also paid for each student to buy a book from Country School’s December book fair that would be donated to Gardner.

Many books bore a specially-designed book plate: “A gift to Gardner Academy from Mrs. Spencer’s Third Grade Almaden Country School 2003-2004.”

The building that burned had been newly renovated. Library-aide Dahlin, who toured with the Country School students, said she had recently finished unpacking and arranging all the books in the library when the fire struck.

“The whole ceiling fell in,” she said. “All the books were either burned or wet.”

Gardner Principal Mildred Arellano said the library had many classic books, some out of print, that they won’t be able to replace.

The school has not been able to replace the two computer labs, housed in the building that burned. All 40 computers in the labs were damaged. “We tried cleaning them up but they’re gone,” Vargas said.

Two former Gardner students were arrested in connection with the blaze.

Work on a new structure is scheduled to begin this summer, Arellano said. The building won't be ready to occupy until the 2005-2006 school year.

Vargas suggested the classes continue their relationship, even establishing a pen-pal type network. Spencer readily agreed and told the Gardner students to expect another, albeit smaller, book shipment near the end of the school year.

"We are writing our own book," she told the students, "and once we publish it, we will send you a copy."