

Discovering the gifts in every child

Almaden Country School commemorates 25th anniversary with yearlong celebration

By Jeanne Carbone Lewis
Staff Writer

Almaden Country School started because of one woman's dream. And that dream continues as the school celebrates 25 years of growth and excellence in education. "I really wanted a school that was a community," said Almaden Country School [ACS] founder Nan Hunter.

"That first day was a dream come true. I wanted to start a new school and promote fresh thinking about learning. I wanted children to truly succeed by offering a broad curriculum including arts, language, science, drama, and math. And while I didn't have the formal training in teaching, I gathered people around me who knew how to develop the school I thought we needed."

History

ACS was founded in 1982 on the site of the former Henderson Elementary School. Furniture was purchased for the classrooms, a piano for the music program, chalkboards were replaced and the school was given a fresh coat of paint. The campus improved through the years with new playgrounds, a garden, middle school facilities and additional committed teachers who shared Hunter's dream. The school grew from 170 children the first year to the current enrollment of approximately 375.

Hunter convinced educator Jean Delwiche to help with the immense project of getting a private school off the ground that would help to discover the gifts in every student. Delwiche joined ACS in 1982 as a teacher and then became principal in 1986 until her retirement in 2006. However, she still serves on the board and substitute teaches on occasion.

"Once I came here, I knew this was a great place," said Delwiche. "I had the opportunity to teach the way I wanted to teach. I was not going to move once I was here." During Delwiche's tenure, ACS entered the world of technology offering students a computer lab; today sixth graders have their own laptops as part of an 18-month pilot program. She supported the junior kindergartner program that differentiated the school from others. And she had fun dressing as a witch with green make-up each Halloween and celebrating at the annual Thanksgiving feast dressed as a pilgrim where the students create the meal.

Delwiche and Hunter faced the difficult times as well working as a team with dedicated parents, faculty and students. Events such as a fire in a school building, the loss of a third grade teacher after a tragic accident, the financially difficult years and the near loss of the school site when the district considered taking it back bonded the school community together.



"I love being here," said ACS head of schools Steve Hayden. From left: Hayden, daughter and soon-to-be-kindergartner Julia Hayden with ACS director of admissions Sara Stephenson.

Photo by Jeanne Carbone Lewis

Philosophy

One thing that has remained constant at ACS is their philosophy. It is the belief that each child has unique capabilities and gifts, and their talents should be identified and nurtured to help them develop factual knowledge, achievement skills and a strong moral character.

“Unlock a child’s heart and the mind will follow,” said Hunter. “We strive to build relationships with students and parents that allow children to take the risks necessary to learn. When children feel safe, cared for, and respected for their gifts and talents, they work hard, think creatively, and embrace challenges with confidence.” Today ACS head of schools Steve Hayden took the reign of ACS 12 years ago. He continues Hunter’s dream of a school where discovering the gifts in every child is realized.



ACS's volleyball team hams it up for the camera.

“I love being here,” said Hayden. “The school has done nothing but grow for 25 years. It’s all about building a strong sense of community, getting support from the parents, and making sure everyone feels safe to take risks. Learning is all about taking risks. No where else in life are people expected to learn something new, not only every day, but many moments during the day. That’s risky business because you risk failure, exposing your weaknesses.”

“That was Nan’s genius, her ability to create a culture and community where students and teachers feel safe. When I started here in 1995 she said ‘just remember one thing. A child will do anything a teacher asks them. They’ll work hard for them, do homework, obey in class, and mind their behavior if there is a relationship of love and trust.’ And

that’s the secret of Almaden Country School. It’s palpable and present,” added Hayden, who just happens to be Hunter’s son-in-law.

Celebrating 25 years

ACS has celebrated its 25th anniversary all year with their annual Thanksgiving feast and patriotic assembly. Eighth graders participated in an oral history project where students researched and interviewed ACS founder Hunter and Delwiche, head of school Hayden and teachers June Chapman, Sherry Curtis, Helen SooHoo, Karen Tomkins and Sharon Wilkus. An all-school showcase exhibit of the kids’ talents and studies for the school year was presented this past week. And many of the students are looking forward to ACS summer camp, theater and music classes, though sessions are open to all.

“There’s always something wonderful going on at Almaden Country School,” said ACS director of admissions Sara Stephenson, who joined the school in 2006. “The fourth graders studied California history at the Malakoff Diggings, the fifth graders went to science camp, the sixth graders to Yosemite, seventh to Catalina Island, and the eighth graders to Washington, D.C., Gettysburg, and Philadelphia to learn about the birth of a nation. There are so many fantastic things we do for the children.”

Stephenson relates that a deciding factor to join ACS was being so impressed with the middle school children who “looked you in the eyes,



Lights, camera, action. ACS kids act in a school play. Photos courtesy of Almaden Country School

listened, and answered questions so thoughtfully.”

But perhaps the best kudos comes from the alumni of Almaden Country School.

“I loved being a student at ACS so much that I decided that I wanted to be a teacher,” said Rebecca Barrett. “I have been teaching for eight years now, and I hope that I am the kind of teacher that helps students love learning as much as I did. It was such a wonderful environment. I have the greatest childhood memories and so many of them are directly tied to my years at Almaden Country School.”

For more information on Almaden Country School, visit www.a-cs.org or call (408) 997-0424.



Steve “Woz” Wozniak visited the Almaden Country School this past week and shared his expertise and answered questions from the students regarding co-founding Apple Computer. Wozniak, left, is a personal friend of Randy Wingginton, right, whose daughter Andrea attends the private school.
