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Almaden Country School celebrates Thanksgiving holiday with a feast

School welcomes naturalists from Catalina visiting on bike tour of state

By Lorraine Gabbert
Staff Writer

Like families gathering for the holidays, school communities around Almaden Valley joined together to celebrate Thanksgiving, sharing in feasts and reflecting upon their bounty. Continuing a 25-year-old tradition, the Almaden Country School community shared in a traditional Thanksgiving feast, which the entire school helped to prepare the previous day.

With tables laid for 400, the preschool through eighth grade students joined together, with middle school students sitting with their preschool buddies and helping serve them food. “We count our blessings,” says Head of Schools Steve Hayden, “including having a great school community.”

Founder Nan Hunter, who couldn’t attend, sent her thoughts in a letter. “I picture you in my mind, in costumes, with homemade decorations on the tables, buddies with their buddies, parents eager to serve and give thanks,” she said. “I give thanks for all of you. How wonderfully you’ve carried on the dream, the vision and the joy of giving this precious gift to the children of Almaden Country School.”

Hunter and Hayden especially thanked Maureen Conlin for coordinating the Thanksgiving feast for more than 15 years. “It really is about the kids,” says Conlin. “They work together and do it all. It’s about being a community and giving back.”

Hayden agrees. “This really does capture the spirit of the Almaden Country School,” he says. “It stands for everything we’re about: helping each other, sharing our bounty, giving thanks, having



Middle school students enjoy sitting with their preschool buddies and helping serve food.

Photo by Lorraine Gabbert

a great time together and joining together as a community.”

Before the meal commenced, the choir sang a traditional Thanks-giving song and shared in a blessing. “Even though we’re not a religious school, a number of the families are,” says Hayden, “and appreciate having a place to celebrate this tradition and give thanks.”

Hayden sees this holiday as a learning experience for the students. “We celebrate the contributions of our forefathers,” he says. “And remember. So much of what we have today, we have because of the sacrifices other people made. It reminds us of the bounty we have and the obligation to give thanks to other people and to work together as a community.”

A visit from the Ambassadors of the Environment

Teaching students about sustainable living, naturalists from the Ambassadors of the Environment (AOTE) visited Almaden Country School as part of their statewide bike tour. Sponsored by Jean Michel Cousteau’s Ocean Futures Society, they plan to visit nearly 20 of the schools, which attend Catalina Island for AOTE educational programs.

“This will be a special treat for middle school students of Almaden Country School,” says Hayden. Each year, their seventh grade students spend four days on Catalina Island as part of an Environmental Leadership Program. There, they kayak, hike, participate in team building activities and work in an all-organic garden. Most memorable, perhaps, are the snorkel dives amid the giant kelp beds. “We swim with leopard sharks and bat rays,” says math teacher Anne Hubbard. “During the night dive, we turn off our lights and watch the ocean light up with bioluminescent creatures that glow as you move through the water,”

The AOTE naturalists will arrive just on time for the 25th annual Almaden Country School Thanksgiving feast.

“The students bond with the naturalists,” says Hayden. “And are excited to reconnect with them. They are some of the neatest people you’ll ever meet. Really down to earth, good people and the kids love them.”

Hayden believes that this visit will reinforce what students learned in the Environmental Leadership Program as well as introduce those concepts to the others. “On Catalina, the naturalists taught the students that there is no waste in nature,” he says. Incorporating that lesson at Almaden Middle School, they set up a compost garden and recycling stations at the school.

Almaden Country School was a favorite of naturalist Cynthia Goulet. “One girl gave me a book with photos and memories from when she was at Catalina Island,” says Goulet. “It’s the cutest thing ever.”

“I love these kids and had a really good time working with them,” says naturalist Courtney Howard. “They came to our program and we wanted to come to their community and make a real difference for them. Experiential information is so important for children. It’s ironic that they learn about the outdoors inside four walls. They need to get outside and learn about the outdoors firsthand.”

Naturalist Heather Rice agrees. “It’s all about educating children how to protect their natural environment,” she says, “and inspiring them to get outside more.”