

Out with the old...



PHOTO BY NICOLE MONTALVO

A construction crew removed the old restrooms at Village Green. They'll be replaced with new ones like those at Fir Street Park.

Students teach to learn in biology program

By Jim Cornelius
News Editor

It is an old saw, but it's true — the best way to learn something is to teach it.

The Sisters High School biology program has been applying that principle for years, with eighth-graders taking fourth-graders out to the Trout Creek Conservation Area (TCCA) just west of the school for some hands-on learning about the flora and fauna of the area.

The students survey vegetation and keep records to document change over time; measure trees; and look for wildlife sign.

"The small groups (of eighth-graders) prepare lessons to teach the fourth-graders about the organisms that live out there," said teacher Rima Givot. "It's important to establish that sense of place and appreciation for the natural resources that we have around here. The high-schoolers can share what they've learned and help the fourth-graders to appreciate their environment. It's that mentorship thing."

Among the high school mentors were several who had themselves, as fourth-graders, been mentored on the TCCA.

Kincaid Smeltzer noted

that "It's interesting to understand the other side — the teaching aspect rather than the learning aspect."

He said it was important to him to help the younger students "think about your surroundings."

The young mentors gained an appreciation for the challenges of teaching. David Novotny found that he had to be patient and explain things over and over to students with rather short attention spans.

"It was a lot harder to teach the kids than I thought it would be," he said.

Still, it was important.

"I want them to all think it's cool to have forests and nature (rather) than just having buildings there or something," he said. "Maybe they'll do a better job of preserving it."

The young teachers were also tasked with writing up their thoughts on the experience, a project that is to be graded based on how much thought they put into the work.

Givot praised their work.

"This is always the highlight of my year in biology," she said. "I get to see you guys teach what you've learned — and you learned it really well. The level you took them (the fourth-graders) to was pretty cool."

ASPIRE: Mentors help students find a way through maze

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Merola's dream field; her daughter was a theater arts major. Smith has been able to make contact for Merola with a man who is a performing artist and currently works for an arts and cultural organization. He has provided helpful suggestions regarding colleges that might be a good fit for Merola.

In their appointment together last week, Smith had her mentee write down a to-do list of tasks for him to work on prior to their next meeting. In the coming months, they will address general financial considerations, including available scholarships, and college applications, as well as essays, letters of recommendation, and timelines. Between meetings, Merola and Smith will stay in touch by texting, emails, and phone calls as needed.

Without the assistance and support of the ASPIRE mentors, the path to post-high-school plans can feel like an overwhelming maze to both students and their parents — one of whom said, "We'd be lost without this program."

The ASPIRE mentors are able to provide helpful advice and direction without "speaking in a parent's voice," said five-year veteran Diane Russell.

"We are able to keep students on track with their plans. After earning their trust, and listening to them, we are able to explore all avenues," added Russell.

With the departure of program leader Susanna Harrison from SHS, Rick Kroytz, who is in the school two days a week, now oversees the program. The experienced mentors are helping him get up to speed and have spent untold hours working hard to keep the program going. Kroytz's position is funded with a combination of money from the state program and the local school district, but the former superintendent cut

the district support from the budget.

Right now, the biggest thing needed by the program, besides stable funding, are more volunteers willing to become mentors.

There are students waiting for someone to help them. All it takes is a desire to work with students — no college degree or special experience is required. Training and materials are provided and new volunteers begin by shadowing current mentors. Most new mentors begin with two or three students with whom they meet individually once a month.

College counselor Theresa Wadden is onsite two Tuesdays a month and available to meet with students, parents, and mentors to provide specific guidance and knowledgeable advice.

"Theresa has an incredible knowledge-base and can straighten out any situation," Russell said.

She knows about the colleges, the necessary tests like SAT and ACT, financial resources, deadlines, and where to access all the information to help find the best student/college fit.

A mentor may be a retiree, a parent of younger students who wants to learn about the whole post-high school field before being in it, a business person who can meet with students during school hours, single, married, male, female, older, younger — someone who just likes kids and has a desire to help students, and is able to make a commitment and keep it.

There is even a mentor who goes away for a month each winter and stays in touch

via texting, email, and phone.

Russell indicated that mentors get as much as they give in their relationship with students. One young woman, who she mentored for two years, contacted Russell once she was at Southern Oregon University and said, "Diane, I love it here. Thanks for all your help."

New school district superintendent Curt Scholl was just in the process of bringing ASPIRE into Sprague High School when he left to assume his duties here. He sees the program as a great addition to counseling services provided to the students.

"I do think there is a great value in what the ASPIRE coordinator, along with the volunteers, does for our students and we will be looking at our next budget cycle to see how we can fund it more consistently," he said.

Scholl sees benefits from the program not only for the students, but also for the mentors and the community.

"The benefits for our students are that they get a mentor to support their college and career goals. I think there is a larger benefit in the sense of community-building. We have a large population of volunteers that have had incredible experiences and we have great students. Connecting them through the ASPIRE program is a win/win and a great way to continue the strong sense of community here in Sisters."

To volunteer or for more information, contact Rick Kroytz, ASPIRE coordinator, 541-241-4841 or rick.kroytz@sisters.k12.or.us.

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