

Life Skills, Transitions programs get students into community

By Erin Borla
Correspondent

Every afternoon 21 students in the Sisters High School (SHS) Life Skills program head out into the community for some hard work.

The program serves students from special education along with student mentors from the general education track. Students vary in age from fifth grade to those that have graduated but are not yet 21.

“If someone were to look into the classroom they wouldn’t be able to easily identify the mentors from the special education students,” says advisor Josh Nordell. “Our students get to practice life skills, recreation skills, and even a special set of job skills that fit each of their needs. They really thrive in this environment.”

Nordell is thrilled with the community support the Life Skills program has received. Each day of the week students do something unique with a different partner business in town. Activities include practicing adaptive taekwondo at Outlaw Martial Arts, taking cooking classes in the basement of The Belfry, job skills training at Sisters High School, working at the community garden, and even working on their hand-eye coordination through practicing golf out at Black Butte Ranch.

Harmony Farm Sanctuary, located off Cascade Avenue, helps to provide rehabilitation for local farm animals as well

as a place for humans and animals to reconnect. Every Thursday, the Life Skills class brings several students out to help with chores and learn about animal husbandry.

“I think the most important thing we do here is pet the animals,” Nordell says with a smile.

“The students are always so eager to help and learn,” says Lene, a volunteer at the Sanctuary. “I hope they come away from this experience knowing a little more about how to care for animals — even if it’s just how to treat them with kindness.”

“The animals are my favorite part of this class,” says Brian, a junior in the Life Skills program. “I want to be a farmer when I am done with school. I love the rabbits and the pigs.”

In addition to their work at Harmony Farm, students learn to plant and care for vegetables and flowers at the Sisters Community Garden with the help of volunteer Marvin Benson.

“Every week they are excited to be here,” says Benson.

They work hard in a variety of jobs around the garden including planting seeds, moving bark mulch, and watering. Benson developed a series of raised vegetable beds near the front of the garden that are easily accessible for people with different needs. The space around the new beds is wide enough for students in wheelchairs or walkers.

Helping to bridge the gap

of those students enrolled in special education at Sisters High School transition into adulthood, the Life Skills program has expanded this year. This fall is the first year of the new Transitions Program that is held off-site at The Belfry every morning of the week for 2-3 hours. Eight students, age 18-21, are enrolled through SHS. The program focuses on working in hands-on, experience-based activities. The class recently started a coffee shop at Sisters High School to give students job training.

“The idea is getting students experience in a school-based business, then having them move on to a job-skills internship at a local business; and finally into the workforce,” says Nordell. “This program definitely benefits these kids. They are spending time learning skills they wouldn’t learn in the classroom — how to be successful living and working on their own.”

The Oregon Department of Education chose Sisters High School as a flagship program for the Transitions Program last spring. There are several programs already in larger districts. Sisters is one of the first in a small, rural setting.

“Smaller districts have greater trouble building programs like these. The Department of Education is thrilled with the success and participation in the Sisters program,” says Nordell.



PHOTO BY ERIN BORLA

Marvin Benson, Soren Smith, and a volunteer working at the Community Garden planting carrot seeds.

The students love Nordell and the program. Each of them beam with excitement when asked about their favorite part of the class. Looking to the future, every student has a chance to experience something that has inspired them.

“I want to work with heavy machinery when I graduate,” says Andrew. “Driving dump trucks and other trucks — that’d be cool.”

In addition to the coffee shop in Sisters High School, the Life Skills class is selling T-shirts encouraging folks

to “be comfortable with difference” to raise money and awareness for their program. Nordell also set up a GoFundMe.com page last year to help provide supplies for the Transitions Program.

“The GoFundMe.com page raised all the funds needed to start the program and the partnerships with local volunteers and businesses have helped to develop and continue the program this year,” says Nordell. “The relationships within the community are what I am most proud of.”

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