

VHS Senior Trip: A Fun and Educational Tradition

By Scott Laird

Yes, it's only February, but seniors at Vernonia High School are starting to plan for the end of the year and their June graduation. But before graduation, there's another important rite of passage for those seniors, one they've been working toward and looking forward to all year – the Senior Class Trip.

The senior's trip to Disneyland has become a fun tradition at VHS, but it's also just one more opportunity for these students to receive an education – just not from a book or a lecture.

The four day/three night trip happens each year thanks to the hard work and planning of a core group of volunteers, who organize the travel logistics and help students earn the money they need each year. They also make sure the kids stay safe and have a great time, while also giving them just a little taste of the freedom and responsibility they are about to experience when they graduate and go out into the world beyond high school.

"We go down there and we have fun, but it's also a learning experience," says Cathy Ward. "They're going to be out in the world in six short weeks – in the military, on jobs, in trade schools, in college. Some of our students have never flown on an airplane and don't know the process of going through security. We want them to have fun, but in a safe environment, and we give them some room to make good decisions. It's not just about going to Disneyland."

The Senior Trip has been ongoing

for many years, but after a brief hiatus, it was revived in 2008 when Shelley Hennessy's daughter Shandee was a senior. Hennessy helped organize the trip that year with the help of long-time teacher Ward, and the two have been organizing it ever since. Recently they added a few more members to their Senior Trip Committee; Victoria Coleman, Jeanna Gump, Nona Skinner, and Kristina McCord have all joined in the fun and help share the numerous responsibilities to make the trip happen.

And there are a lot of responsibilities! This year 34 students are planning to go on the trip, scheduled for April 24-27, along with 11 adults. The cost for the trip is about \$1,000 for each person, so students need to start earning that money in the summer (sometimes sooner) before their senior year starts. Some parents pay for their students' trip as a reward for getting good grades, or because they can afford it – other students have to earn the money themselves and make monthly payments to reserve their spot. The Committee organizes fundraisers – like a monthly bottle and can collection, bake sales and 50/50 raffles at school sporting events, raffles and food at the Christmas Bazaar and other events, collect the garbage for pay at the Jamboree, and host a large rummage sale – one of the final fundraisers which is scheduled for March 15-16 this year.

"It's a lot of work for the Committee each year," says Hennessy. The advantage to having a Committee, says Ward, is having a core group of people

who know the process and what's needed. "Each year we're starting out with a new group of kids and a new group of parents, so we were always reinventing the wheel, in a way," says Ward.

Hennessy takes care of purchasing the tickets to the parks, (in addition to Disneyland, the students also visit Knott's Berry Farm and Medieval Times) and McCord makes the flight arrangements. Ward and Hennessy purchase food and prepare continental breakfasts, lunches, and dinners at the hotel in California to cut down on expenses, and bottled water is provided for the kids during the day in the parks. Some parents of seniors help with fundraisers throughout the year and a few join the trip each year as chaperones. The Committee helps students stay on track with their payments, and makes sure they have their identification in order for travel.

Transportation to the airport and back home is donated by Curl School Bus Service (where Hennessy is a supervisor) and one of Curl's bus drivers donates their time to drive them – although all students kick-in \$2 each as a "tip," for the driver, another built in learning experience for students. "Everything we do, we try to tell the kids why, so they can learn," explains Ward.

Students do learn a variety of things through the Senior Trip process – how to work to earn something they want, how to budget money and make regular payments, how to be respectful, polite, and appreciative while traveling.

"I don't think we would be able to do the trip without the support of community members and businesses who donate," say Ward. "People dig into their pockets a lot in this community, so one of the things we try to teach the kids before they go out into the world is about giving back to your community," says Ward. "The kids do things to earn money, but also that help out in the community. So it's an educational thing as well."

Ward appreciates the support of VHS Principal Nate Underwood, who works with the students to make sure they understand the rules during the trip and potential consequences, and the


School Board, who allow the students to travel out of state for the trip.

Students need to be on-track to graduate to be eligible for the trip. They also need to actively be working to raise their funds and pay their way. "It's not a free ride. If they're not making the effort, we don't help them or do it for them," says Hennessy.

Students are well regulated during the trip, starting the night before they leave, when their luggage is turned in and checked, and then locked in the travel bus. In the morning before they leave students' carry-on bags are also checked. At the hotel, students have to check their room key in and out with Ward or another adult, so someone always knows when they are in their rooms. Students have to be reachable by cell phone at all times. Students have to stop in for breakfast in the morning, so the adults get to see them and make sure they have water and sunscreen. The Committee has a first aid kit they take with them. Chaperones are in charge of a small group of students and check on them periodically. "They have boundaries, and we're there for them if they need us, but we treat them like adults," says Hennessy. "And Mr. Underwood is on speed dial, so they know if they misbehave their chance to walk with their class and graduate is on the line," adds Ward. "This is a school activity, so all the same rules apply."

An event like the Senior Trip really takes the whole community to come together and make it happen for their high school seniors, by donating cans and bottles, supporting raffles and bake sales, and providing support and encouragement. "Every year we have people who donate anonymously for students in need," says Ward. "And then we tell our kids they will need to pay it forward in the future, because someone helped them – by giving back to the community or helping someone else in some way."

If you would like to help support the Senior Trip with a donation or provide items for the upcoming rummage sale, you can contact Shelley Hennessy at (503) 536-3396 or Cathy Ward at (503) 803-3382.



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