

# KeizerCommunity

KEIZERTIMES.COM

## Weddle students get into giving spirit

### LGBT Chorus hits stage this weekend

By **MATT RAWLINGS**  
*Of the Keizertimes*

While many of their peers are busy making their wish list for Santa, the students in the life skills special education class at Weddle Elementary have been working on something a little bit different.

On Monday morning, each of the life skills kids went around the school delivering special holiday coffee mugs as presents for the staff. Each mug came with a peppermint candy cane and a special note.

Stephanie Martin, who has been substitute teaching in the classroom since the beginning of the school year, was the main organizer for the project. Martin is filling in for Michelle Merritt, who is currently on maternity leave.

"December can be kind of a stressful time for these kids, so one of the things that can help with the angst is to start thinking about other people," Martin said. "I think it's a big help for kids to practice the idea of giving away."

Many of the students were a little bit scared to have an interaction with an adult that they weren't familiar with. But that fear melted away when they were greeted with a warm smile and a hug.

"The look on the kids faces after giving their gift is priceless," Martin said. "Each child responds a little bit differently, but you can tell by their engagement that they are totally into this. It's something that they have become really excited about."

Before transitioning into a role as a sub, Martin worked as a librarian at several different schools throughout the Salem-Keizer area for more than two decades. But she first got the idea to do this with the life skills classroom when she was a substitute at Houck in 2015.

"I just wanted to tailor an



TOP LEFT: Derhyan (second grade) gives a mug to 4th grade teacher Anna Johnson. TOP RIGHT: Audrey (second grade) gives a gift to 5th grade teacher Emily Nevins. Below: The entire Life Skills class.

activity to fit those kids," Martin said. "It's so important to teach empathy."

The idea behind this project is not only to teach empathy, but also teach the joy that comes with giving.

Laura Wyler has been an instructional assistant in the life skills room at Weddle for the last 12 years and she is a big fan of the project that Martin has brought to the class.

"It really is wonderful," Wyler said. "It's teaching the kids to interact with the other adults, which is good exposure for our kids."

It took a few days of practice, but by the time Monday came around, the students were ready to hand out their gifts around the school. And members of the staff was more than thrilled to receive their presents.

"The joy of giving a gift was really the focus this morning. Students realizing how good it feels when they are able to make someone else feel good," fifth grade teacher Emily Nevins said.

"It made my day when the students brought that mug to me today. It is so good to receive a gift but also to give, no matter how much it costs. It is all about how it makes the person feel."

Fourth grade teacher Jonathan Stover also added: "Having the young girl give me the gift today was easily the highlight of my day."





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