

Frustration at Wagner Ranch

By Lee Borrowman



A district employee removes tiles one at a time



The wall as it appeared a few years ago

Children went happily about the business of

being students last week at Wagner Ranch Elementary (WR), looking forward to this week's Scary Story Night and Monster Mash, blissfully unaware, as were some of their parents, that controversy was raging behind the scenes.

Principal Janis Arnerich faced a challenge towards the end of the last school year. WR was outgrowing its facilities, and rather than creating overcrowded 5th grade classes and 3rd/4th split classes, Arnerich and Orinda Union School District (OUSD) administrators decided to have a portable structure installed on the site. OUSD facilities personnel determined that the only reasonable and cost-effective location for the portable was a space near the front of the school that was, unfortunately, occupied by the "Founders Wall," an installation that was created by the first families to attend WR after it reopened in 1997. The wall was composed of tiles bearing the handprints and artwork of many of the students of the day.

These families worked hard to help build the school. To them, the tiles were not only fond memories of their children's time at the school, but symbols of the dedication and effort that was put in to making "The Ranch" a school of which all would be proud.

And WR is indeed a school of which all can be proud. WR's API score jumped 5 points last year

to an impressive 955, and the school has been invited to apply for the California Distinguished School designation.

The decision was made in May to move the wall so the portable classrooms could be installed. Arnerich explained that during the excavation of the wall in July, it was discovered that the foundation was so large and secure that it could not be dug around and lifted up. As the wall was deconstructed, it was also found to have no supportive cage around it so any attempt to lift it would have resulted in the destruction of the wall.

Julie Whitsitt, a WR parent and community volunteer said, "At that point, in most construction projects, a back-hoe would have been used to demolish the whole thing. To the district's credit, they took the time to remove each concrete tile by hand, preserving every tile that they could." Arnerich estimates that 20%-25% of the tiles were destroyed. A few of the salvaged tiles were claimed by parents last week; the remaining tiles are in Arnerich's office, awaiting reinstallation in another location at an as yet undetermined date.

The action prompted some of the founding families to ask, "Why weren't we contacted at any point in this process so that we could help find a way to safely remove the tiles?" Arnerich's position is that the district had insufficient time and resources to contact everyone. Whitsitt believes, "While arguments can be made on both sides about the communication of needing to relocate the wall, the facts do

saved, but are understanding of the decision to move the wall. Some feel that their hard work has not been appreciated, while others take a more pragmatic approach, agreeing that the wall was the property of the school district. "My memories are not locked in a tile," said one mom. A few are angered that Arnerich and OUSD have been unresponsive to their expressions of concern and, in a few cases, outrage. Former WR parent Allena Behnke writes, "If the district doesn't respond to us on this topic, I have no reason to believe they will respond to any other concern that I may have in the future." OUSD Superintendent Joe Jaconette declined to comment on this issue.

Whitsitt's closing remarks reflect the view of the majority of current Wagner Ranch parents: "No one is more dedicated to all of our children (than Arnerich). Every leader must make hard decisions; some are not popular. The scrutiny of this decision has gone in a direction that has become personal, off-topic and distracting. All past, present and future Wagner Ranch parents and students have learned valuable lessons regarding the history of our campus vs the needs of future generations. I would like us to move forward and continue educating our future leaders."



Excavating the wall

not show malicious intent."

Arnerich explains, "We never intended to destroy the wall or anyone's memories. Every effort was made to save the tiles. But my first priority must be the children that are here now, and we need to give them the best possible education."

Most parents are saddened that some of the tiles could not be

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