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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 Americh 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, Americh 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. Americh 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." Americh 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 Americh's office, awaiting rein-



Excavating the wall stalling 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?" Americh'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 not show malicious intent."

Americh 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 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 Americh 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 Americh). Every leader must make

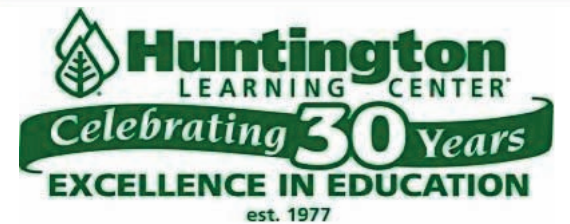
hard decisions; some are not popular. The scrutiny of this decision has gone in a direction that has become personal, off-topic and distracting. All past, present and future Wagner Ranch parents and students have

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."

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Happy Valley Celebrates 50 Years

By Cathy Tyson



Current Principal Wendy Patterson and past Principal Carol Blackburn are surrounded by past and present teachers, administrators, and Parent Club members

Bright sunshine and "Rock around the Clock" greeted carnival goers at the recent Happy Valley Elementary School 50th Anniversary Party. Past, present and future Parent Club Presidents greeted the crowd of special guests along with current pupils and parents in 50's inspired attire. It was warm hugs all around for many of the honored teachers and principals from yesteryear. Parents Club organizers sponsored a special reunion reception next door at the Sammann's garden after the public festivities to give past teachers a chance to visit and catch up, over 75 guests came to enjoy the reunion.

"It's a magical place for children and teachers and par-

ents," said past teacher Kent Peterman. Wendy Patterson who is starting her sixth year as principal said, "it's an amazing special place, deeply rooted in the community."

It's such a special place that Anthony and Shayna Giorgianni, along with their three children, recently moved from a different area of Lafayette to be within the Happy Valley school boundary.

Older Happy Valley graduates may remember principal (1974 - 1978) Bob Lilley who made a special trip up from Palm Springs. Carol Blackburn, principal for over 25 years (1978 - 2002) came from Alameda. Even the second superintendent, Francis Ebbert made the trip, he served from



1962 - 1972.

Karla McQuain, current Parents Club President and Amy Ruegg, past Happy Valley student herself, now with a daughter at the school, and a number of other parent volunteers worked hard to make the day happen.

Jan Broad, current third grade teacher, summed up the warm feelings for the school, "this is my first job, and I'm going to retire here."

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