

Orinda Schools Celebrate the First Thanksgiving

By Jane Wisner

“We gather together” takes on new meaning at the Wagner Ranch Nature Area in November as each fifth grader in the Orinda Union School District participates in the annual “First Thanksgiving”. One of several programs at the Nature Area, First Thanksgiving is sponsored by the Educational Foundation of Orinda (EFO). EFO is providing \$65,000 this year to fund nearly 100% of the environmental instruction at the Wagner Ranch Nature Area for all Orinda elementary students.

Costumed in Native American and pilgrim attire and adopting period names to help personify the experience, students spend a day in the life of an early American, complete with authentic crafts, games, and preparation of the Thanksgiving feast. Students rotate between activities such as leather-craft, metal work, corn husk dolls, and sack races. They sign a proclamation of attendance with a hand-made feather quill. Archery has returned to the Nature Area this year with great enthusiasm, and at First Thanksgiving real pumpkins are used for target practice.

“Beside us to guide us” is Toris Jaeger, District Naturalist. For nearly 30 years, Toris has educated students in many fields of environmental science offering a unique hands-on outdoor classroom complimenting the in-class science curriculum. The Nature Area, aided by the Friends of the Wagner Ranch Nature Area, is a

perfect site for such study as a nature preserve that includes Bear Creek, an exploration pond, raised bed gardens, and an outdoor cooking center.

Once it is time for the feast, a communal table is adorned with natural décor, and the meal is shared, signifying the blending of cultures and reward for hard work, harvest, and friendship. All food is donated by parents and prepared at the Nature Area, except the roasting of the turkeys. There is no slighting of courses either: sweet potatoes, potatoes, corn, popcorn, stuffing, vegetables, pies are all included, and students work hard to prepare the vast feast. It is a heart warming, communal experience that is well remembered by those who have attended in the past as well as parents who share the day as volunteers.

Living history is what our school children experience at First Thanksgiving. In funding this living



Kelly Cheng participated in a Native American craft project. Photo Caroline Lovell Photography

history experience, EFO continues a longstanding tradition of providing excellence in education in Orinda schools. EFO relies on the generous support of parents and the community at large, and will raise \$1.4 million this year for the benefit of all Orinda students from kindergarten through 12th grade.



Charlie O'Brian spent the day as a Pilgrim

Photo Caroline Lovell Photography