

Middle Schoolers Reach Out to the Community

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JM 7th graders (L to R) Sarah Firth, Hailey Finnane, and Katie Whalen making cookie dough as part of the Bridges Community Service Program
Photo Andrea A. Firth

Students from the three middle schools in Lamorinda—Joaquin Moraga Intermediate (JM), Orinda Intermediate (OIS), and Stanley Middle School—logged almost 9,000 hours of community service over the past school year. That is a statistic that belies the stereotypical picture of kids in their “tween” years who are often described as sullen, awkward, self-centered, and just tough to be around.

“We had a record 532 students participate in [the Others First] community service program at OIS this year—about 60% of the student population participated,” reports Kathy Jones, the parent coordinator of the program. “OIS launched Others First in 2001 with the mission to remind students that a complete education includes a sense of community,” she adds. “I think the program does an excellent job in that regard.”

With the help of parent volunteers, middle school students at all three schools are given the opportunity to volunteer in a variety of service activities both at school and out in the community.

“Many kids like to help at events at their former elementary school such as the science fair or back-to-school night. They always love to go back to help,” says Laura Waal, one of the parent coordinators for Opportunity Knocks—the community service program at Stanley Middle School. Started 15 years ago by Vice Principal Toni McShane, Opportunity Knocks’ activities include monthly visits to the Contra Costa Food Bank and Lafayette Convalescent Hospital, and support for other non-profit organizations such as Little League, the Lafayette Community Center, and the Lafayette Juniors. “Connecting kids with members of the community and helping them to

develop the skills of teamwork, citizenship, kindness, and responsibility are all goals of the program,” adds Waal.

Although JM has required a minimum of five hours of community service per school year for all students for several years, the PTA launched a formal community service program—called Bridges—this year. “Starting half way through the school year, we still had 172 kids participate,” notes parent coordinator MaryEllen Gustafson with satisfaction. JM offered the students several lunchtime activities such as stamping postcards for the military and making cookie dough for a local shelter in addition to community activities. “We are hopeful that kids will continue to get more involved with serving the community and that Bridges will give more kids the chance to go out into the community to serve others,” states Gustafson.

These services programs appear to be a win-win for the students and community alike. “[The community service programs] provide a great opportunity to bring many different students together, helping to create a more caring and supportive school community,” states Jones of OIS. “The students come together and work cooperatively and in the process get to know each other better too. It connects kids not only within the school environment and the greater Lamorinda community but to the community beyond as well.”