

Classified Employees: An Often Overlooked Resource of the School Districts

By Sophie Braccini



Jim Joaquin (right) is praised by Human Resources Director Frank Acocido Photo Sophie Braccini

Jim Joaquin was hired by the Acalanes Union High School District (AUHSD) as a substitute custodian in 1971. Over the years, he worked his way up the ladder to a manager's position, made friends along the road and now retires with many memories and a few regrets about leaving the job and the people he loves. Joaquin is a fine example of those employees that are essential to the survival of our schools but who do not always receive the acknowledgement they deserve.

"I will miss Jim," said AUHSD Director of Human Resources Frank Acocido. "He was wonderful to work with, had a personable and positive attitude that made him a consensus builder who could reach out to all the levels of the hierarchy." Even though he became the supervisor of all the custodians in the Acalanes School district,

Jim would never hesitate to roll up his sleeves when help was needed. As the District's requests evolved, he responded by accepting different positions, such as gardener in the early days and food services lead manager later.

Chris Learned, AUHSD Assistant Superintendent, couldn't agree more. "I will miss Jim, he is a great person and was recognized by his peers as Classified Employee of the year in 1993." Learned knows the importance of well-trained maintenance personnel. As the district is defining its needs in term of capital improvement, questions are being raised about the adequacy of maintenance power available in the District.

"It is true that proper maintenance is one of the factors that affect the condition of the school facilities," acknowledges Learned, "It is

critical to perform routine maintenance of all buildings systems in a timely manner. Lack of doing so would cause building systems to wear out much quicker than the normal expected life-cycle."

Some in the District are concerned that with the job suppressions that have taken place to respond to the budget crisis, the lack of maintenance of school facilities could become costly in the long term. "Classified staff receiving layoff notices...will create a slowing down of routine maintenance," responded Learned, "but not to the point where I would feel that the taxpayers' investment is not being protected."

AUHSF Superintendent Jim Negri further addressed the issue by promising that if he can re-hire personnel when the budget is finally approved, the classified employees will be first on his list. "We haven't re-hired anybody after the May revised budget," says Negri, "we will wait for the final budget to be voted on over the summer."

The crisis over custodial services is spread all over the area's school districts. Joaquin plans on taking it easy for a while, but he knows he will have no problem finding a part time position if he wants one. "I have received calls from different schools for a part time job," he says, "they've had to lay off many employees and are scrambling to get sufficient service."

Lamorinda Schools

Bill Walters to Lead at LP

By Andrea A. Firth



Bill Walters, Principal at Los Perales Elementary School in Moraga

Photo Andrea A. Firth

After working for over twenty years in the Moraga School District and serving for several years before and after in schools in other parts of California and abroad, it would seem reasonable that an experienced school administrator like Bill Walters would have moved on to a more relaxed set up—like retirement. Walters tried it, retirement that is, but it did not last long. "It was ok," says Walters. "I spent time with friends, but I really missed being part of a group, part of the school system." So when his former boss, Rick Schafer, the Superintendent of the Moraga School District, approached him about working as the Interim Principal at Los Perales Elementary School (LP) last year, Walters did not hesitate.

"It's a new adventure working in a kindergarten through 5th grade school. It's exciting, and I really enjoy it," says Walters, who has spent a good part of his career as a schoolteacher and administrator in the middle school setting. After serving as the interim Principal at Los Perales for the past school year, Walters was recently appointed Principal. "Bill has earned the respect and support of the staff and parents [at LP]...and he is excited to be involved in the early years of educating students," states Superintendent Schafer. "I have come to enjoy his weekly accounts of how the young students are so excited about school and learning. I truly think Bill is enjoying school more than the kindergarten," adds Schafer.

When Walters took over at Los Perales, he had some big shoes to fill with the departure of Bruce Burns who went on to the top spot at Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School. "Bill came to LP at a very challenging time," explains Chris O'Connell, the Secretary at Los Perales. "Construction on the new library was about to start. There was a lot of anxiety among the LP community, but Bill provided a calming, steady presence, while building trust and respect among students, parents and staff," she adds.

In addition to getting accustomed to the elementary school setting, Walters has found that he has also had to get used to letting some things go. "The volunteer culture here is very strong. The parents, students, and teachers form a great team," states Walters. "I have had to make the nice adjustment of not having to control everything."

As for becoming part of a school group once again, Walters comment is succinct and direct. "The staff here is fantastic." And it appears that the staff at LP feels the same way about Walters. "We are thrilled to have him become a permanent part of the LP family," says O'Connell. "Bill has brought his own personality and leadership style to LP while continuing Bruce's legacy of students who love to learn, staff who are encouraged and supported, and parents who feel included and valued—a long with a great sense of humor, which is essential in any workplace."

School Transitions—Exciting and Scary at the Same Time

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In addition to taking advantage of the many orientation programs and resources available at college campuses and websites, Banion recommends that parents and students clearly establish expectations for things such as grades, phone calls home, and spending money well before departing for school. "It is a good idea to revisit these expectations after the first semester to see what is working and what needs refinement," she says.

Easing the Transition: "The most important intervention that a parent can provide to help ease a child's transition [to a new school setting] is reassurance," states Felt of JM. "Letting your child know that you believe that he or she will succeed both academically and socially in the next phase of school is important." Counselors and advi-

sors at every school level recommend providing students with as much exposure to a new school as possible.

If Problems Arise: Easing the transition to the next phase of school does not guarantee that problems with academic performance and social integration will not occur. "Be proactive with your child's teachers. Establish a healthy relationship with the teacher from the beginning," says Felt. This will make working with the teacher easier if the student needs help with academic or social problems. "If something feels different, then it is," advises Banion from SMC. "Parents know their children." She recommends that parents maintain an open dialogue with their child and to ask directly if they feel something is wrong.

12th Grade to College: In the

time between high school graduation and the first week of college, most students experience a mixed bag of emotions. "Anxiety may be the predominant emotion," states Kayla Banion, the Interim Director of New Student and Family Programs at Saint Mary's College in Moraga. "College freshman are excited but nervous about fitting in and meeting expectations," she adds.

One of the most challenging aspects of the transition to college for most students is re-evaluating how to find community. Having left the safety of their high school friends, college students must start over in a new setting. "The first year of college is such a transition period. There are so many things that can happen academically, socially, and spiritually," says Banion.

Middle Schoolers Reach Out to the Community

Andrea A. Firth



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 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 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."

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