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Rheem Elementary School Hosts Native American Days

By Jean Follmer



Rheem Elementary School Native American Day Photo provided

Rheem Elementary School recently hosted its long-standing Native American Days. As part of Moraga School District's Living History program, the annual event enables all Moraga 3rd graders to learn about Native Americans and participate in related activities. The program is run completely by parent volunteers and was coordinated by Rheem parent Sharon Gilbanks. Rheem Elementary teacher Lee Culver said they focus on teaching the students about the community aspects of the tribe that once lived in the Moraga area. Culver said it's debatable whether or not the Moraga Native Americans were "Saklans who spoke Sakla" or were "Saklas who spoke Saklan."

Upon arrival at Native American Days, each class is divided into three "tribes." Each tribe rotates through four activities: a hike, games, home-building and crafts. During the hour-long hike, students listen to Native American stories while looking for bones and snake skins that were planted by parent volunteers. They also look for significant plants like poison oak and bay leaves. They learn a modern version of a Native American game that trained older children to accurately throw spears. Bark houses were built using redwood and rocks and the kids played floor games inside. The crafts included basket weaving and making prayer sticks. To make the prayer (or wish) sticks, the children wrote their wish on a piece of paper and then wrapped the wish to a stick using yarn, plants and beads. The idea of the prayer stick is to make positive wishes for good health or prosperity and give the completed stick to someone else. Culver said the Native Americans would continue to pass the prayer stick from person to person with the thought that it would eventually return to its maker. "This is the origin of the term Indian Giver. Its origin is really a positive term," said Culver.

Culver said the other components of the Living History program include a focus on early California for 4th graders and early America for 5th graders.

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