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## Election Outreach in Orinda

By Andrea A. Firth



Michele Olsen reads to a Glorietta kindergarten class as part of her election outreach program Photo A. Firth

As Michele Olsen read to a group of kindergarten students in Ms. Johnson's class at Glorietta Elementary School, she was there as both a mother (of her five-year old son, Sam) and as the Orinda City Clerk. Olsen launched an election outreach program in the Orinda Union School District (OUSD) this year to help young students make sense of the proliferation of brightly colored signs that have appeared on lawns and roadsides throughout their neighborhoods during this historic election season.

"It is important to demystify the election process for the youth in Orinda so they have a better understanding of current events and understand the importance of being an informed citizen," explains Olsen, who has spoken to kindergarten, 2nd, 3rd, and 5th grades classes at Glorietta and Del Rey Schools as part of her election outreach efforts. "My motivation, in part, for organizing this effort was following out the City Council's adopted goals of providing Community Outreach to its residents (both big and small) and partnering with local agencies like OUSD," adds Olsen. "It is also my duty as a Municipal Clerk to educate as many people as possible on the election process, most specifically the importance of voting."

For the younger set, Olsen read the book *Duck for President*, which tells the story of an ambitious duck who wins his first election against Farmer Brown to become head of the farm. Duck then works his way up to the Presidency but finds that running a country is very hard work. The story concludes with Duck abandoning the political world and at work on his biography. The playful story introduced children to the vocabulary of the voting process with words like

candidate, ballot, polling place, and oath.

With the older students, Olsen was able to delve even deeper into the legislative process. In some classes she held mock elections in which students voted by both open and secret ballots. They were able to see first-hand the potential influence of peer pressure on the voting process.

"The students were incredibly informed about the election process, specifically the presidential election," says Olsen. "The questions that they asked were relevant and insightful and demonstrated that they have been taught in an unbiased manner," she adds. Olsen looks forward to continuing and expanding the school election outreach program in the years to come to ensure the kindergarteners of 2008 are casting their votes in the election of 2021.

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