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A Community Gets Behind One of Its Teachers

By *Sophie Braccini*

For anyone, a diagnosis of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease) is devastating. ALS is characterized by a progressive degeneration of motor nerve cells causing increased muscle weakness. Only 50% of those diagnosed with ALS survive for more than three years; one form of the disease has a much faster evolution than the other form. In either case the disease is fatal - there is no known cure. Scott Turner, a 3rd grade teacher at Burton Valley School, learned this fall that his father has ALS.

For the Turner family, to the pain of the disease was added the financial burden caused by the refusal of their medical insurance carrier to cover the cost of home care. The sad news spread in the community and a group of parents decided to put together a fund-raising campaign to help the Turner family. "This is very hard for them in dealing with the illness, but also coming out and letting others help them," said Marsha King, who was part of the parents' team.

The planning of the event took off with a ripple effect. Each person who had been touched by a member of the Turner family engaged in the process and moved others along the way. "Scott has an interesting impact on people," said Deborah Simmons, whose son was in Turner's class in 2001/2002, "the parents of the kids had a huge involvement with the class and him, it was an amazing class, and we never let go of the relationship."

"He makes a phenomenal difference in people's lives," said Kim Curiel, whose two middle kids had Turner seven and nine years ago, "he makes a connection with the kids they never forget."

"He is a magical teacher," adds King, "he is very caring and compassionate, he has a way with kids and has the ability to get to them so learning comes alive, and the children learn a lot."

As a result of his popularity, anyone that Curiel called agreed to participate. "Everyone I talked to, whether their child had been in Scott's class one or ten years ago, responded right away," she said. Curiel sent out emails, and used the old directory from school to call people. There was no hesitation, not one refusal. "Scott's in trouble, we've got to help out," was the general answer. "It was like in the movie 'It's a Wonderful Life' with Jimmy Stewart," said Curiel.

King had the same amazing experience with merchants, most of whom didn't even know Turner. She started with Trader Joe's and then went store to store in Lafayette and Rheem in Moraga. "It was just a blessing for me each time to see what would transpire," reflects King, "theses businesses are intensively asked to give in our community, but each time I saw their reluctance/no softening and turning to a yes." King says she feels proud that she was able to participate in these moments when people connect and reach out to form a community.

Many others helped or donated something. For example, King contacted Nancy Rosso, who gave her expertise in silent auction setting and management; other individuals made a gift for the auction such as Campolindo senior Emily Gilson, who gave hours of tutoring even though she had never had Turner as a teacher.

On the evening of the fundraiser, Saturday, Nov. 15th, more than 250 people gathered at the Elk Lodge in Walnut Creek. In the first room, rows of tables had been arranged to hold all 120 donations for the silent auction. In the second hall were round dining tables and the stage was set for a classic rock group. "This is the kind of music that my father loves," said Turner, as he looked fondly at his

father circulating around the crowd in his wheel chair. A lot of people gave more than the requested \$35 to join that night and all of the items for the auction were sold, often for over their face value. "This was a joyful event," concluded Curiel who had donated some of her paintings, "We feel blessed to have been part of it," added King.

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