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It's LASF Science Fair Season

By Jean Follmer

The LASF Science Fair season is here and the Lafayette schools are busy with preparations. The LASF Science Fairs require many hours and often months of planning and behind-the-scenes efforts of many dedicated volunteers. Springhill Elementary was the first Lafayette School to hold its LASF Science Fair this year. "We started planning in November and it took over 65 parents and volunteers," said Springhill LASF Science Fair Co-Chair Sharon Kidd. The efforts proved successful and the school experienced a higher student participation rate than last year. "Almost all of the classes had over a 50% participation rate and I think that's really impressive," said Springhill Co-Chair Rhodora Del Rosario.

The rest of the Lafayette schools have LASF Science Fairs scheduled later this month and in March: Happy Valley Elementary on February 19, Lafayette Elementary on February 26, Burton Valley Elementary on March 19 and Stanley Middle on March 25. Mary Ilyin and Maureen Bagley are co-chairing the LASF Science Expo at Stanley this year. Ilyin chaired her first LASF Science Fair as a Lafayette Elementary parent and is now chairing Stanley's LASF Expo for the second time.

Stanley holds the LASF Science Expo every other year, alternating with the LASF Rube Goldberg Fair. Ilyin said she and Bagley have been planning the Stanley Expo for months and she'll have logged between 80 and 100 hours by the time it's over. The Stanley Expo will include options such as a wheelchair obstacle races, a head injury specialist showing what can happen if you don't bother to wear or buckle your helmet, star-gazing with the Lawrence Berkeley Labs, the Lindsay Wildlife Museum and Guitar Hero. "We try to have a diverse group. We try to have it diverse enough so kids who are into astronomy can look at the stars and kids who are into animals can experience animals. Science is in everything we do in life," said Ilyin. Ilyin encourages the public to attend the LASF Science Expo at Stanley.

Lafayette Elementary parent Janet Estee is co-chairing the school's LASF Science Fair this year. Estee is a Molecular Biologist and works on gene therapy at Sangamo BioSciences. "Last year I was a guest scientist at the (LASF Lafayette Elementary) science fair and I wanted to get more involved," said Estee. Guest scientists are generally parent volunteers in white LASF lab coats. The lab coats make the interviews seem more official to the students and a number of the volunteers are actually in a science-related field. They interview the student scientists about their projects to discover what may have motivated the student to do the particular project and what they learned.

Through LASF, Estee has partnered with the Lafayette Library. Estee said Youth Services Librarian Donna Lenhardt has been especially supportive and has placed numerous scientific experiment books and posters on display throughout the library. "The library has been great pulling the books. The books were gone so quickly at Lafayette Elementary," said Estee. Estee has a personal collection of antique science glassware that is currently on display at the Lafayette Library.

Estee and her 3rd grader daughter have taken the "science experiment" to a new level. Last year, her daughter extracted DNA from common household products like strawberries and dishwashing soap. Estee said "This year we're going to set up an assembly line so they (the other students) can see how different reagents work." A reagent is a test substance that is added in order to bring about

a reaction or to see whether a reaction occurs. They'll show the DNA of an onion. "It starts out a soapy mixture with chopped up onion and then we pour on the isopropyl alcohol. They'll see how the DNA will go through the different layers. The DNA actually just floats up and you can see the strands. I went through it with my daughter, but she actually did it. My daughter wants to do neuroscience - it's sweet of her to want to understand what I do," said Estee.

LASF has been actively involved in the Lafayette and Acalanes Union High School Districts since 1980. LASF is instrumental in providing "curriculum-based programs and support in the areas of science, math, history, writing, foreign language, technology, art, and music to the students of all of Lafayette's public schools." The volunteer organization was founded "in response to education cutbacks resulting from Proposition 13." LASF Executive Director Myrna Kimmelman said the level of participation at each of the LASF Science Fairs is outstanding. The fairs are also visible venues for LASF itself. "I think it's a really wonderful way for the schools to learn more about what LASF does," said Kimmelman. With generous community support and the efforts of over 100 volunteers, LASF was able to raise over \$1 million for the Lafayette public schools last year. LASF is already an essential educational component of the Lafayette Schools. With the current budget crisis, LASF's involvement will only become more critical for Lafayette's public schools.



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