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Huge Support, Tough Choices for Many Lamorinda Musicians

By Jean Follmer



Liz Brummel directs the Lafayette Elementary and Springhill Elementary 5th Grade Bands at the recent 26th Annual Lafayette School District Band Festival
Photo Jean Follmer

When school districts are faced with budget crunches, music programs (and the arts in general) are often quickly cited as “expendable.” Not so in Lamorinda.

Lamorinda districts and their partner organizations continue to recognize the arts as an integral part of overall community growth. Along with parents, school districts and the greater communities, the Educational Foundation of Orinda, the Lafayette Arts and Science

Foundation, and the Moraga Education Foundation continue to demonstrate their strong belief in the value of music in our communities.

At the 26th Annual Lafayette School District Band Festival last week, Stanley Middle School Band Director Bob Athayde said, “LASF is the most positive, and to my knowledge, the most effective of any organization helping with public school music.”

The audience in the packed

gymnasium erupted in applause.

Yet even with the strong community support for music in Lamorinda, there can be challenges. While many students have the opportunity to join the band, the orchestra or the choir in elementary school, when Lafayette and Moraga students enter sixth grade, they’re only allowed one elective and they have to make a choice.

Lafayette mother Patricia Kuan, whose fifth grade twins will head to Stanley Middle School next year is torn with the decision. “My kids are very creative and they really want to try an elective called FACETS,” she said. While her son plays the violin and her daughter plays the flute, Kuan and her husband decided to let the kids take sixth grade off from music and return to it in seventh grade when they can choose two electives.

Kuan said it’s still hard to give up music, even for a year.

By contrast, Orinda Intermediate School sixth graders have two elective choices. OIS Band Director Greg Mazmanian is grateful. “We’re pretty fortunate in Orinda,” he said.

Joaquin Moraga Band Director Adam Noel has felt the effects of the single elective choice in sixth grade. He encourages kids to stick with music if they can. Noel said the rate at which society is moving often makes music a more difficult commitment.

“I find it increasingly difficult as everything is speeding up and there are more choices,” he said. “You can’t do music quickly. Music takes time. You have to be willing to spend the small amount of free time you have on music.”

Mazmanian agrees that music becomes an increasingly bigger commitment as the years go on. “As (students) get older, they notice they have to practice every day,” he said. “There is a discipline involved so, of course, there’s going to be some fallout. If you want to attain excellence, it requires discipline.”

And music is challenging. Mazmanian likened performing on stage to publicly taking a math test. Generally tests are taken privately so there is great pressure to perform well when “tested” on stage. Mazmanian continued by saying, “It’s (music) not just for the brain but for the soul as well. Music is very emotional.”

For those weighing what to choose, Noel said, “As parents we really need to remember that we’re the ones with the cognitive ability to have foresight. We need to make sure that our kids are making the decisions that will result in them (growing) into the kind of adults they want to be. They should enjoy their childhood but not ignore that larger part of life that is adulthood. Music is a long-term investment that will pay off in the end.”

I’ve never met anyone that says, ‘I’m really glad I can’t play an instrument now,’” finished Noel.

Healthcare, “Green” Jobs Most Popular at Miramonte Career Night

By Jean Follmer



Mechanical Engineer Lyn Gomes addresses the students while Environmental Engineer Rebecca Overacre, Civil Engineer Al Saadeh and Moderator Frank Darling look on
Photo Jean Follmer

More than 300 students attended the Orinda Rotary Club’s annual Miramonte Career Night at Miramonte High School last week to listen to panelists from 10 industries including Architecture & Design, Business & Entrepreneur, Technology & Computers, Engineering, Law, Media/Communications, Performing Arts and Science, Government & Politics, and Medical/Health Care.

The Government & Politics panel included Orinda Mayor Sue Severson, Orinda City Clerk Michele Olsen, and Orinda Police Detective Nate McCormack. The Medical/Health Care panel included a chiropractor, a veterinarian and nursing professor.

Two of the most popular ca-

reers for students were “green” jobs and those involving healthcare.

Environmental engineer Rebecca Overacre sat on the engineering panel along with a civil and a mechanical engineer. She said she chose her career because “I’m good at math and science and I wanted to protect the environment.”

Overacre went the “environmental science route” in her undergraduate studies. Once she got into the field, she realized the environmental engineers were actually doing what she wanted to do, so she returned to school and received her graduate degree in Environmental Engineering and now works entirely on municipal water and sewer.

The attendance in the Medical/Health Care session was so high

that attendees recommended a larger room for that industry next year.

Business & Entrepreneur moderator & Rotarian Henry Gannet was envious, and joked, “(Our Panel) hasn’t been doing well lately because I’m a realtor and (Jeannie Rhodes) is a financial planner.”

Located in 10 separate classrooms, each panel member made a 5-minute presentation and then opened up for questions.

In the Business & Entrepreneur session, students asked the panelists what their inspiration is for getting up in the morning and if any of them went to graduate school. One student pointedly asked “What do you dislike most about your job?”

The Business & Entrepreneur panelists said regardless of the economic situation, you need to be a good listener. “It’s my job to listen well enough to do a plan for (my clients),” Rhodes said.

“You need to be a good listener – not to what you want to hear but to what they’re trying to say,” Joe Shamash added.

Many of the students got extra credit for attending Career Night.

“Teachers who teach classes in fields that are represented generally give extra credit,” said Miramonte College and Career Coordinator Eloise Schneider. “We try to make a connection between what (panelists) do and what we teach.”

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Education Foundation of Orinda’s Celebration of the Arts

Submitted by Stephanie Catron



The Education Foundation of Orinda (EFO) will hold its 6th Annual Celebration of the Arts at 6:30 p.m. on April 14 at the Orinda Intermediate School. More than 500 Orinda students participated in this large-scale public exposition of student art, films, instrumental music, choral music, public speaking and other talents last year.

Sponsored by Mechanics Bank with primary funding from EFO, the works of art from Orinda students of all school ages – including digital photography, paintings, sculptures, woodworking and even student films – will be prominently displayed. The event will also feature five performances of the fourth and fifth grade bands, middle school chorus and high school symphonic band, as well as demonstrations of oratory and theatrical talents from the highly acclaimed Miramonte High School public speaking and drama programs.

Moraga Teacher Heads to the Wild

Millie Tang, a fourth grade teacher at Moraga’s Los Perales Elementary School, will join the Earthwatch Institute’s “Mammals of Nova Scotia” expedition research team in Nova Scotia, Canada led by research associates from Oxford University on April 12-25. Tang, together with other scientists and volunteers, will assist the researchers on collecting data on conservation efforts looking into how the changing climatic conditions and human activities are

putting pressure on the ecosystem, landscape and wildlife through a variety of field-controlled experiments and studies.

As part of her educator fellowship, which is sponsored by Wells Fargo Bank, Tang will use satellite and internet technology to connect “Live from the Field” to her classroom. Her students will further participate by following and responding on her daily blog. Tang says she is looking forward to sharing her adventure with her

fourth graders: “This is an exciting opportunity for me to bring first hand experience on climate change and environmental awareness studies back into my classroom.”

In addition to the fellowship, Wells Fargo Bank will provide a \$200 grant to implement a community conservation project to further engage Los Perales students in their classroom and in their community.

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Girl Scouts Making a Difference

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They have partnered with Girl Scouts of Northern California – the end result being a kid-friendly presentation on global climate change that was well received by the audience.

A chorus line of charming Scouts talking about what individually they are doing followed, for example: turning off the computer or TV when not in use, taking shorter showers, dressing warmly instead of turning up the heat, changing light bulbs to energy efficient compact fluorescents. One first grader from Lafayette Elementary said, “I walk to school because cars are bad for the environment.”

Fifth grader Samantha Taketa

spoke about the problem of plastic bags - less than 3% end up being recycled, they aren’t biodegradable and they strangle sea animals. She had a huge ball of 1,000 bags as a visual aid to demonstrate how many the average American family uses in a year. She humbly suggests that families choose re-usable tote bags instead.

In addition, the Scouts worked hard on a variety of educational displays, “By kids, for kids” illustrating a number of simple concrete actions that can make a difference. Other displays from Cool the Earth, Alliance for Climate Education, ECO lunchboxes, Kids vs. Global Warming could be found

along the perimeter of the large room.

“After all their hard work and planning, the girls are very proud of how well things came together. They were very excited to see and hear for themselves how many great people in our community really care about the environment and are already working to bring positive change! The girls also reported that they ‘had a blast.’ They are going to keep ‘telling others’ and will be at the Lamorinda Earth Day Festival on April 19 at Stanley Middle School with their energy, colorful displays, giant plastic bag ball and Action Coupon Books,” said Troop Leader Johnston.