

Published October 26th, 2011

Butterflies are Free

Cathy Dausman



A kaleidoscope of kindergarten butterflies alight on the playground at Rheem Elementary School Photo Doug Kohen

The kids remember it." Teachers and students hunted the hills then in search of milkweed plants holding eggs. After butterflies disappeared from the hillsides, teachers turned to mail order. That first year Theer had boys dressed as a caterpillar; now all kindergarteners sprout wings.

Teacher Bess Inzeo says the students begin their butterfly studies in early October. The caterpillars arrive, shed their skins and become chrysalides. Some two weeks later the butterflies emerge. The class feeds them for a few days, and then releases them at the parade, "...if mother nature cooperates," notes Inzeo.

This year's parade was especially important to Anne Obsitnik, whose mother teaches kindergarten in Winnetka, Illinois using a similar curriculum. Anne's daughter Caroline was a participant, and Caroline's older sister Chase received special permission to attend the parade. Chase missed her own class Butterfly Parade two years ago because she was sick. Obsitnik enjoyed watching the "sea of little wings" and taking photos she would send to the girls' grandmother.

Students and parents ended the event with class parties, featuring butterfly cookies and punch. For all in attendance, it doesn't get much better. With this program, adds Kindergarten teacher Cathy Kathan, "We're keeping the magic in kindergarten!"



From left: Christine Chai Kelly with daughter Jamie Kelly; Stephanie and Hania Kusinski; Maryeda Theer; Hania's grandmother, Karen Chin; and teacher Bess Inzeo. Photos Doug Kohen

Mention a school parade in October, and thoughts naturally turn to Halloween. This parade, although also predominately colored orange and black, was not. It was the annual Donald Rheem Elementary Butterfly Parade and release. Three classes of kindergarteners, with their fifth grade "buddies," for an audience and a host of parents, families and friends marched the playground in decorated cardboard butterfly wings before watching the Painted Lady butterflies they had raised fly away. Painted Ladies, also known as thistle butterflies, or cosmopolitan, look like a slightly smaller version of the Monarch butterfly.

Principal Elaine Frank said this year's Butterfly Parade was the school's 37th, with retired Rheem kindergarten teachers Alberta Svendsen, Kathi Beadleson and Maryeda Theer in attendance, and a second generation kindergarten student participating. Stephanie Kusinski's daughter Hania made her own wings this year; after the parade the pair met with Theer, who was Stephanie's kindergarten teacher.

Theer developed Rheem's butterfly curriculum in 1974. She says she "stole" the idea from a Leo Politi book called *The Butterflies Come*. It was the perfect teachable moment, combining writing, art, math and science.

Beadleson says it was "one of the best units in kindergarten.



Maureen Kang takes a peek into the butterfly basket

story-photo-caption4



Reach the reporter at: cathy.d@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA