

Happy Valley Fifth Graders Bring Colonial America to Life

By Cathy Tyson



Students perform period-era dances at Colonial Day.

Kids decked out in aprons and bonnets were dancing with joy to the music of a fiddler in a historic barn directly adjacent to Happy Valley Elementary School for Colonial Days. Who knew 90 fifth graders could have this much fun on a rainy day without electronics?

This annual event wouldn't be possible without the help of many parent volunteers, tireless fifth-grade teachers Wendy Duncan, Christina Freschl and Juanita McSweeney, as well as Lafayette's generous community that donated goods and services to bring colonial American history to life.

Describing the day as "awesome," one young lady showed the dent in her finger from holding the nail she was hammering to decorate her creative tin lantern.

Right next door was a station to make candles, because as the student learned, back in the day there was no electricity. Students also rotated through cross-stitching, sewing, painting and helping prepare lunch. That itself was a lesson, as it included shucking and barbecuing clams — a first for many of these suburbanites — that would eventually become a delicious clam chowder.

Getting ready for the celebratory lunch feast in the multi-purpose room, another student commented that she could live back then even though it was "so much harder, you had to

make everything. There were no stores — like Macy's."

"At this point, it's a well-oiled machine," said Principal Shayna Peeff. "This is one of their favorite days of the year." She wasn't kidding, as clearly enthusiastic students were practicing their do-si-dos even before the music started. Boys were out in the rain on stilts and wooden blocks with string handles similar to "romper stompers."

The idea behind this "active learning" is the kids participate in activities that an average child their age would normally do in the Colonial era, pitching in to support the household. With supervision, the students peeled and chopped apples that morphed into a tasty applesauce — ditto for celery, potatoes and clams prepared under the watchful eye of Postino chef Stewart Beatty. And a lot of shakin' was going on to create manually "churned" butter.

Volunteer Bill Carroll was in charge of the butter station. He started helping out at Colonial Days when he had a fifth-grade grandson participating three years ago, but he likes to be involved.

"The kids love it" he said. "There's an immediate sense of accomplishment." It just takes some muscle to shake glass jars of heavy cream and a bit of salt; when the liquid buttermilk separates from the solid butter, it's done.

Photos Andy Scheck

Clearly a group effort made all of this possible. It was kind of bitter-sweet for food organizer and former PTA president Dolores Dumas-Aris, whose youngest child is now in the fifth grade; this is her last year.

Organic Coup provided a hundred pounds of organic turkey breasts that a Kinder's Meats grillmaster was kind enough to barbecue in the rain. Diablo Foods generously donated food and Walnut Creek restaurant 1515 donated large trays of mashed potatoes. Key to the entire day was neighboring family the Sammans, donating the use of their two-story barn.

Organizers thought of everything, with homemade quilts and a huge American flag decorating the straight-out-of-central-casting barn, complete with hay bales. Even the chicken statues had bandanas.

Gracious remarks from none other than George Washington in a very attractive cotton ball wig gave thanks before lunch was served. Kids snapped their fingers in response as "Washington" recognized their "bounty and full tables overflowing," and "the ability to serve others."

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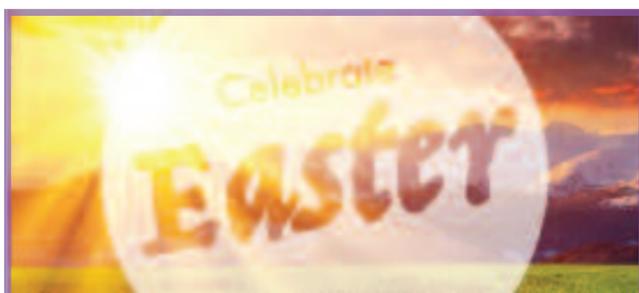
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