

ROOTS & Wings

Spring 2006

THE NEWSLETTER of ECHO HORIZON SCHOOL

4th Grade Native American Unit

Perhaps no aspect of the Echo Horizon curriculum is more illustrative of the school's commitment to authentic education than the Native American Honor Unit taught by Mr. Call and Mrs. Wynn in fourth grade. Here, students undergo a variety of tests — in an approximation of an actual initiation ceremony — as well as using more traditional research methods to learn about the Tongva Indians, the original inhabitants of Southern California 2000 years ago. "The idea," says Mrs. Wynn, "is to give an historical perspective. This opens our California history unit and allows us to ask: Who was here first and what happened to them?" At the same time, she continues, "We try to make it a complete study of a culture, even to the point of learning what a culture is. It also helps us teach an appreciation of Native American life."

The Honor Unit was not always such an interactive enterprise. Until about three years ago, in fact, it was a pretty standard unit on Native American culture, more academic and focused on the Chumash, a Santa Barbara tribe. Then, in the summer of 2003, Mr. Call took a summer workshop with a Tongva teacher, and it altered everything. He brought information back to share with Mrs. Wynn. "We changed gears," he says, "we started talking about the Los Angeles basin, with its four sacred rivers and four sacred mountains." Together, they adjusted the curriculum to be more experiential, beginning with the idea of interacting with the students as if they were members of a Tongva tribe.

What such interaction offers is a way for students to get inside the material, and, in so doing, to reconsider their own sense of place. "This ties into our lives and our curriculum," Mr. Call says, "often in ways we don't expect." As part of the unit, for instance, students go on a vision quest, in which they confront certain challenges and issues, like courage or solitude. They undergo tests and are asked to write about them, to explore not just the information but the experience itself.

"The education," Mr. Call says, "is multifaceted. It teaches modes of behavior. We look at different paths people take, which speaks directly to what the students are going through." As an example, he cites the Circle of Mistakes, a ritual in which the Tongva embrace the notion of making mistakes as a learning guide. Then, there's the Sacred Lodge the teachers erect in the classroom, as well as Mr. Call's authentic Tongva ceremonial robe. "It usually turns out to be what kids remember most from fourth grade," Mrs. Wynn says, and Mr. Call wholeheartedly agrees. "It's remarkable," he explains. "They never forget it. This is where it starts getting rich."

EHS Native Americans



Matthew Brussell, Nicholas Taylor and Riley Jameson make music the Tongva Way.

Family to Family

At a time when Echo Horizon students are usually anticipating the gifts they'll receive during the holiday season, they take time each year to focus on the wishlists of those less fortunate than they.

For at least 20 years, EHS students have participated in some type of community service project. The past six years have been focused on the Family-to-Family project in which students in every grade shop for and donate items requested by the members of anonymous families served by the Didi Hirsch Community Mental Health Center in Culver City.

From winter coats, to store gift cards, to Barbie dolls and new backpacks, the items overflow donation boxes in the classrooms. At EHS, it has become as much a part of December as the winter program and class parties.

This year, the students' gifts reached over 100 families served by the center.

"We selected families whose treatment we believed would be furthered by the receipt of gifts," says Philip Khoury, Child and Family Program Director at Didi Hirsch.

As part of the school's ongoing service-learning curriculum, the project meets the guidelines of an appropriate service-learning project outlined by the Alliance for Service Learning in Education Reform. According to the organization which developed standards for service-learning initiatives, well-implemented projects are "thoughtfully organized," meet actual needs in the community, provide structured time for young people to think, talk, or write about the work, and help foster a sense of caring for others.

With Echo Horizon's younger students, the parents assume much of the responsibility for the project. But as children get older, they play a greater role in deciding what they want to buy for the 8-year-old girl in the "Smith" family or the mother of four in the "Taylor" family, for example.

"At the upper grades, the kids do all the coordinating and assembling of what is needed. They even collect the money and then purchase what is needed on their own," says Sheryl Udell, the 1st grade teacher who helps

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Recently, one of our parents asked me why we do not emphasize Black History Month at Echo Horizon. I took a deep breath and started to respond, but then took a second deep breath and allowed time to listen and to reflect on the reasons for the question. Perhaps our focus on building an inclusive community needs more visibility.

Early in my tenure at EHS, I realized that devoting a single month to black history, another to women's history, time in May to Hispanic history, etc. was not an effective way to build a community that is inclusive and that values diversity in all of its manifestations. Perhaps the issue was "in my face" because of our hearing-impaired students, who at that time were not well integrated into the school. Instead, the faculty and I took the approach that diversity should be reflected everywhere: in our student body, in our curriculum, in our faculty and staff, in our visual displays. And it should be all the time, not just during a finite period on the school calendar.

We needed to develop ways to talk about differences, to understand one another, to resolve conflicts with respect and in ways that would enlighten rather than polarize. History, in particular, should include the study of the struggles of all cultures, not just those rooted in Europe. We needed to find ways to build connections among our hearing and hearing-impaired students, our white and non-white students, those from traditional and non-traditional families. We wanted to develop a community that values difference, but that shares



the most human values of respect, honesty, compassion and responsibility. Our goal has been to weave differences and expressions of diversity throughout our program.

Have we done an effective job? We have made progress, but we are not satisfied; we are not finished. Achieving diversity is hard, and working toward it is a process. It is a process that not only allows for, but that requires personal transformation. We have newer faculty who were not part of those early discussions, and we have not effectively engaged parents on these topics. We have more to do with our curriculum. But we are committed and, in fact, our Board of Trustees recently reorganized its diversity committee and charged it, and me, with addressing these issues more proactively.

This is all exciting—and sometimes the challenges seem overwhelming—but it is critically important that we move forward if we are to prepare our students for the global realities of today's world.

At the recent NAIS Annual Conference in Boston, I had the privilege of hearing a brilliant talk by Ruth Simmons, president of Brown University. Her comments were simple but profound, and, interestingly, she hit the question of segmenting ethnic studies head on. She said that when February comes around, she recoils from the attitude that it is time to "hit the road to talk about black people." Personally, she is ready to go "beyond having my own month. Don't put me in that box. I want something more."

At EHS we, too, want something more.

"We Have Two Gifts to Give Our Children... One is Roots, the Other, Wings."

MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of Echo Horizon School is to educate hearing and hearing-impaired children in an inclusive environment in which independence, self-reliance and mutual respect are valued and encouraged with a curriculum designed to be challenging and developmentally appropriate for each learner.

GOALS

- Students will develop the academic tools, social skills and moral integrity needed to be successful in the next phase of education.
- Students will integrate themselves successfully, making contributions to a diverse society, while maintaining individuality and respect for others.
- Students will generate a variety of solutions and approaches to situations requiring thoughtful and creative problem solving.
- Students will develop the skills and positive attitude for engaging in learning as a life-long process.

Head of School: Paula R. Dashiell Echo Center Director: Vicki C. Ishida Executive Director Norma F. Roberts

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organize the project school-wide.

In the classroom, the activity generates discussions about the needs of other people and the difficulties that families served by the center might be facing.

For more than 60 years, the center in Culver City, as well as its nine other locations throughout the Los Angeles metro area, has been providing counseling, case management, substance abuse treatment, residential care and a variety of other services to adults and children in turmoil.

Recognizing that the academic performance of children suffering from neglect or abuse is often adversely affected, the center also provides school-based mental health services, such as counseling and tutoring to help keep children focused on their schoolwork.

Each year, the Family-to-Family Project culminates with a visit to the center, in which student representatives from each grade participate in delivering the gifts and catching a glimpse of how their generosity might benefit someone in need. Mr. Khoury is there to greet them and answer their questions. "He explains to the children that the families come to his facility because they are people that need help working out problems that occur in their families, at home, or maybe at school or at their jobs," Ms. Udell says.

Serving as a class representative also comes with additional responsibilities as the students must come prepared with questions, listen closely, and then report back to their classmates what they learned.

Mr. Khoury says he wishes Echo Horizon's families could sometimes see the looks—and some of the tears—on the faces of the parents and children who receive the gifts. There was one single father, Mr. Khoury says, "who was convinced that his children would need to go without gifts this year, a prospect that was most disturbing to him. He was one of the families identified in the gift drive and he and his children were overwhelmed with joy at receiving such a wonderful array of gifts."



Lydia Pratt and Alexis Holland carry boxes to the Didi Hirsch Center.

Melanie Langer, '00, a senior at Windward School, studied creative writing at Columbia University this past summer and plans to major in linguistics when she goes to college next fall. "I've always loved language," she says, "ever since I was little" — an affinity encouraged by the language arts program at EHS. Outside school, Melanie co-founded the Laetologists, a philosophy club dedicated to the study of happiness. She credits Echo Horizon with having given her good study skills, and calls the school "a great place to grow up."

Lauren Wolfen, '03, a ninth grader at Harvard-Westlake School, loves the arts. This spring, she auditioned for, and was accepted into, a dance production class, and beyond that, she says, she has "the whole arts department covered," taking electives in painting, acting and singing. For Lauren, all that, at least in part, is an outgrowth of Echo Horizon's strong sense of community and encouragement, which helped give her the confidence to "put myself out there and try new things."

Corinne Pittman, '04, an eighth grader at Marlborough School, is on the tennis and track teams. She loves Math and English, two passions she first discovered at EHS. Moving on to Marlborough was a big jump, but Echo Horizon helped prepare her for the schoolwork. It also, she says, offered something more intangible, a sense of herself as part of a social network. "A lot of my friends from Echo," she explains, "went to Marlborough, and that made things easier from the start. I was able to keep up these friendships, while feeling comfortable enough to make new friends."

SAVE THE DATE: The 2006 EHS Alumni Get-Together will take place on Monday, June 12, 2006, 3 P.M. to 5 P.M.

When Roz Henderson's 2nd graders were studying birds recently, they didn't just read information in books or check out resources from the school library. They took their quest for answers to someone with as much knowledge of the topic as they could find—an expert at the Audubon Society.

And the questions they were researching—such as "Why do eagles reuse their nests?" and "Why do seagulls live near the beach?" weren't assigned by their teacher. They were thought up by the students after spending some time on the subject. Their thought-provoking queries even forced the researcher to spend some time digging for an informed response.

This inquiry-based approach to learning, in which students participate in deciding what they want to know, is taking hold throughout Echo Horizon School as a result of a professional development program being offered at University Elementary School, a laboratory school at the University of California, Los Angeles.

"One of the things we know is that we change teachers' attitudes about teaching," Sharon Sutton, developer of the program said. In the workshops, educators take a traditional lesson in which the teacher would be imparting all of the information to the students, and transform it into a standards-based unit in which students are engaged in formulating research questions, solving problems, using technology, and choosing the best sources for information.

"Things have definitely changed since we went to school, when there was a discreet amount of information we needed to learn to be successful," says Elaine Wrenn, the technology coordinator at EHS. "Today's students need to know how to find, evaluate, and create meaning from information so that they can be lifelong learners."

Of course, she added, some educators and

parents might worry that essential information is passed over when students gain more control over the lesson plan. "There are things we want them to learn, and we can structure the activities so that they still learn those things but in a more authentic and meaningful way," Ms. Wrenn says. Students then use the information they've gathered to prepare a project, such as a report, a poster, or even a skit, to share what they've learned

"I've never had students before who liked looking up information in the encyclopedia for fun," says 3rd grade teacher Tracey Tremblay, who uses what she learned at the institute in all of her science lessons. "What a neat phenomenon!"

And these strategies aren't only increasing students' enthusiasm for learning; they're also renewing teachers' attitudes toward their work. "Truthfully, I never considered science as a subject that I loved to teach," Mrs. Tremblay admits. "However, after attending the institute, it is now my favorite subject in class."

The well-paced structure of the institute is another reason why EHS teachers have found it to be such a rewarding experience. The workshops are held on four Saturdays and Mondays, each spread about a month apart, giving the participants a chance to try out some of the practices in their own classrooms and then discuss their results with other teachers. The teachers also have the opportunity to observe these strategies being used in the classrooms at UES.

So far, at least a dozen EHS teachers have completed the institute, and by the end of this year, representatives from almost every grade level in the school will have the training. "It was one of the best in-service workshops I have ever experienced," Mrs. Henderson says. "The teacher becomes a guide who motivates students, provides rich learning environments, and teaches the skills that enable students to conduct research."

Running Fence

The new fence on the north side of the Echo Horizon School building billows as if it were a flag in the wind. EHS parents walk through it for drop-off and pick up, stand in front of it, make plans, set up play dates, and ask their children about their day.

The fence is part of Culver City's "Art in Public Places" program. The idea of public art at Echo Horizon is an excellent one because it encourages students to think of art as an active and ongoing presence in their lives.

As fence designer David Shelton explains, "You want to interact with the art, engage with it, not merely to drive by."

As inspiration, the fence draws from a familiar saying that is the motto of Echo Horizon School: "We have two gifts to give our children, one is roots and the other wings."

For Mr. Shelton the idea of moving art out of museums and into the public sphere, where we can see it, use it, and connect with it at the most fundamental level of our lives, is the very purpose of art.

"This is art that affects you," Mr. Shelton says of the fence. "It's not passive. It's part of the built environment. And it's an opportunity to make a statement about the school." His goal is to have people think about it, to provoke them into using their senses."

The idea was to create something solid that also looked like it was being "swept away." This is the inspiration for the fence's rippling effect, which seems a natural extension of the iron, with its firm roots in the ground. "It should look," Mr. Shelton says,

"like the fence has a mind of its own, as if it were trying to take off." At the same time, it's important that the fence be more than an abstract expression, that it connects somehow to the school building, and indeed, to the neighborhood itself. "The idea," Mr. Shelton explains, "is neither to blend in nor to offend, but to complement, and in doing that, to bring something about the school to life." And our outdoor classroom fence does that! The fence defines the area for an outdoor classroom where teachers can take students to learn and to reflect - outdoors.



A Board That's SMART

As 6th grade teacher Cori Gafni begins a lesson on historical markers, she gives her students some questions to consider. "What is the purpose of a historical marker?" and "What information is often included on a historical marker?" are two of the questions she wants the students to think about and discuss with their classmates.

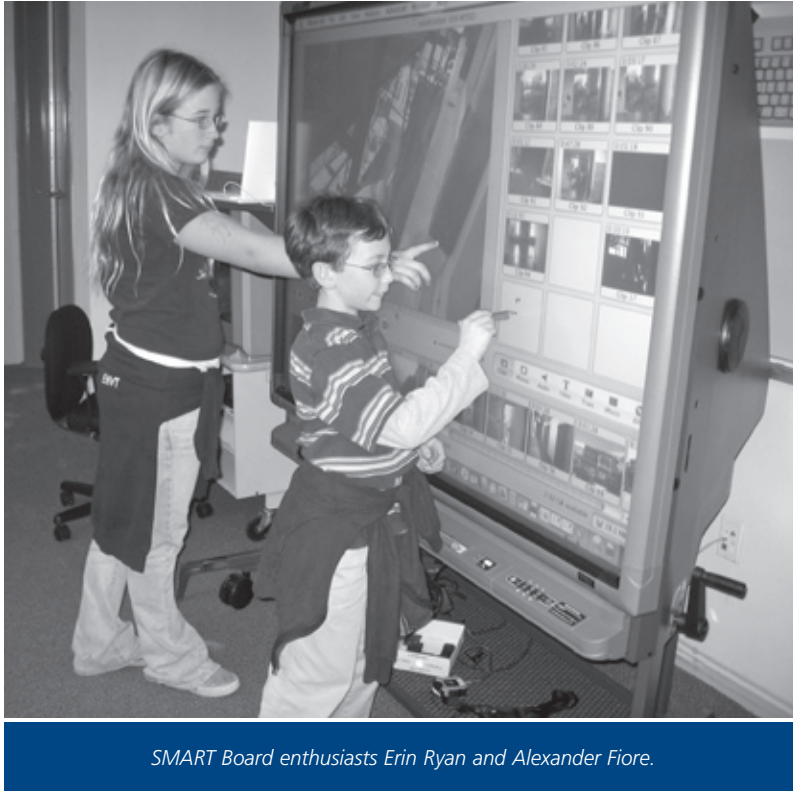
But instead of writing these questions on the board, they are already typed on her computer and displayed in easy-to-read, large print on the classroom's new SMART Board—the latest technological breakthrough making teaching and learning more interactive and efficient.

Created by Smart Technologies, in Calgary, Alberta, in Canada, SMART Boards were developed in 1991. But it wasn't until recently that their use in the nation's classrooms has become more widespread.

As she continues her lesson, she shows the class some examples of historical markers—one from the Pennsylvania Match Factory, another from Agua Fria, a mining town in California. But instead of passing pictures around, she simply touches her screen to bring up the pictures on the SMART Board.

Like a large computer monitor, the SMART Board combines the benefits of a whiteboard, an overhead projector, a computer, and a television into one versatile piece of equipment, that is engaging to learners explains Elaine Wrenn, Echo Horizon's technology coordinator. Because the SMART Board combines so many pieces of equipment, it also frees up much-needed classroom space explains Kristen Berg, who teaches visual arts.

In addition to displaying Websites—that even students in the back of the room can easily see—the SMART Board's touch sensitive screen allows learners to control the computer with their finger tips and to write or mark on the screen with "digital ink." Those



SMART Board enthusiasts Erin Ryan and Alexander Fiore.

drawings or notes can then be saved for a future class period.

"I keep discovering new ways to use them in class," says Mrs Gafni. "For social studies and science it has been a phenomenal interactive tool for maps and diagrams."

Showing iMovies from the 6th grade Yosemite trip, saving class notes for absent students, and teaching new technology skills are just a few of the other ways the 6th grade teachers are using the SMART Boards.

Carly Alsbach, who teaches in the school's Echo program, says the SMART Board is also particularly useful for hearing-impaired children. "No matter how much our teachers face the students, no matter how close to the teacher the students are sitting, and no matter how quiet their peers are, auditory information is still always going to be missed," she explains. "The SMART Board allows our students visual ways to access the information." She adds that the SMART Board also provides them with a way to showcase their strengths in front of their peers."

And now more of Echo Horizon's students will be able to enjoy this unique learning tool because of a new \$50,000 grant from the Weingart Foundation. The award will allow the school to purchase six more SMART Boards. One of the two existing boards at the school was purchased with a grant from Union Bank, and the other was a planned purchase as part of the school's budget last year.

With the new grant, each 5th and 6th grade classroom will have a board, as will the math room, science center, library and the tech center. When these are in place, even our youngest students will benefit from this technological wonder!

Echo Horizon School

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