Ruch Elementary School: It Takes a Village
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The old adage that "it takes a village to raise a child" can be modified to "it takes a village to educate a child." I discovered this recently when my wife Peggy and I attended Cindy McDonald's language arts class at Ruch Elementary School to learn about the Digital Storytelling Project. The school is all about community involvement. I was there because I had been asked to write an article on the project. Peggy was along because I wanted her perspective as a retired elementary school principal.

I first became aware of the project when I attended the Parent Teacher Organization's annual community fundraiser last June: Night in the Valley. I was aware that the fundraiser is critical in supporting the school's art, music, and sports programs— programs that have been lost in so many schools because of tight budgets— but I didn't know about the special projects it supported.

Being a writer, I was naturally attracted to the Digital Storytelling Project. Communication, the ability to share information and persuade people through written and oral presentations, is one of the most important skills we can teach our children. The digital project adds another dimension: the use of technology as an aid. Not only were the students learning how to present well thought out, one to three minute arguments supporting something they were passionate about, they were also learning to use digital media to strengthen their cases. They were making short movies where visual images, either developed by the students or pulled off the web, would support their arguments.

The students were preparing for their future in the Digital Age. But they were also dealing with the now.

They had been asked to develop their individual projects around something they wanted to change. It could be something personal, something in the community, or something in the world. The student interns told me that the projects ranged from dealing with family matters to conserving resources. I was privileged to read a student's summary of a family issue she wanted to address. It was personal and important. It was also powerfully written.

Abram Katz, the digital artist who is teaching the class, believes deeply in the transformative power of writing. "In order for this to happen," Katz told me, "the students need a safe environment where they feel free to express their concerns." They also need to know how to protect themselves when sharing personal information. Katz and his team work hard to create the kind of environment that encourages self-expression and to give the students the skills they need to be

successful. When it comes to communication, Katz practices what he preaches. **"Teachers are as effective as their ability to *communicate* with others. You can have great ideas, but it's the sharing and *exchanging* of ideas that actually makes things interesting."**

My concluding thought: Wow— what a win-win opportunity. Obviously the students were winning. They were excited, engaged and learning valuable skills. But others were winning as well. The project came about because of a close partnership between Ruch Elementary School, the University of Southern Oregon, and the Oregon Writing Project. Ruch gains because it has access to the expertise of the university— and the interns. The University gains because what it is teaching is being grounded and tested in actual classroom experience, and because of the opportunity it provides for student interns. And finally, the community wins. Its children are receiving an excellent education. The dollars and other support it contributes are being well utilized.

Julie Barry, the principal of Ruch Elementary School, and Cindy McDonald, the classroom teacher, deserve commendation for their willingness to invite this innovative program into their school and classroom. They have totally embraced the project. As Julie notes, "The class is amazing. The students truly benefit."

- Curtis and Peggy Mekemson, Applegater