



Royalty in the redwoods

Tiny Kings Mountain
Elementary School,
fueled by the art fair
and remarkable parent
and community
involvement, is a
miracle on the
mountain

✦ By Stacy Trevenon
Photos by Leigh Ann Maze

Graduation Day at Kings Mountain Elementary School was, like anywhere else, a mirror of the school.

First the formalities: the 10 fifth-grade graduates filed into the school's brand-new multipurpose building to "Pomp and Circumstance" and Principal Elizabeth Schuck and Site Director Lauren Newington gave welcomes. Then each graduate spoke, and the room came alive.

Jordan Noel Regan said "Kings Mountain is my favorite school and I'll never forget the wonderful time I had here" after thanking his grandmother for driving six hours to be there. Celina Oswald recalled the day she got in trouble for slipping across the street to pet a friendly dog but "didn't tell my parents until this very moment."

Then fourth-graders gave each graduate robust farewells. One hailed Tyler James Mobraaten by saying "when I'm in fifth grade, I hope I'm as good a role model as he is." Another drew laughs when he told how he and graduate Even Joseph Quirk "got in trouble but it was worth it. Trust me!"

The fun, memories, tributes, in-jokes and camaraderie on display at the June 12 event were business as usual for this school, where time-honored traditions include ringing an old-fashioned school bell to start the day, power failure during winter storms, selling parent-baked giant cookies at the Kings Mountain Art Fair and knowing everyone, including parents and siblings, by first names.

Part of the Cabrillo Unified School District, Kings Mountain School is tucked well off the beaten path along winding Swett Road. Its isolation underlines its trademark close-knit



tapestry of students, parents, staff and community.

"Because of its location on Kings Mountain, the people who live there have to rely on each other," said Newington. "Power outs and storms make it an intense situation to start with. The school is an extension of that."

So, staff, parents and the art fair form a network to prepare kids for life academically and socially.

"It's a school (where) a child finds home, quickly," said Kings Mountain Education Fund treasurer Lisa Parral. "Kindergartners are befriended by fourth-graders. You don't see the separation you see in large schools."

But you do see that Kings Mountain is ranked the fifth highest-scoring San

Kings Mountain Elementary School students play with a jump-rope on the playground at recess.

Mateo County elementary school on standardized tests and has twice been named a California Distinguished School.

"Kings Mountain School embodies the best in community involvement and the fact that parents, students and teachers working together make a big difference," said Newington. "Kings Mountain is what you'd like every school to look like if there was enough money in the state of California."

While school and fine art seem unrelated, they harmonize when the

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school is Kings Mountain and the art forms the backbone of the Kings Mountain Art Fair.

Celebrating its 45th anniversary this year, the fair makes mountain fire protection its first fundraising priority, with the school a close second. As always, 15 percent of proceeds from the professional artists and 10 percent from the Mountain Folk artists goes to the fair board which parcels out the total among the volunteer fire brigade, school and community groups. The board is as generous with Kings Mountain School as the parents are about giant cookies.

"They've been very good at keeping us at the top of their list," said Peggy Moore, Half Moon Bay resident and president of the Kings Mountain Education Fund.

"You can always pick Kings Mountain kids out of a crowd," she

continued. "They're nurtured, made to feel confident. They'll do fine at the next level."

A little mountain school

Kings Mountain Elementary School at 211 Swett Road in Woodside (the community shares the 94062 Woodside zip code) enrolled a little more than 70 students from kindergarten through fifth-grade last year. Half live on the mountain and half commute from the coast — a challenge, with a 7:45 a.m. bell.

"You have to be pretty tough-skinned to do it," said Moore.

Three full-time and one part-time teachers preside over three classrooms (plus a library) for kindergarten, first-second, second-third and fourth-fifth grade classes.

The small size is a plus. "Every fam-

Marla Mabraten, left, gets help writing a story by aide Margot Bridges at Kings Mountain Elementary School.

ily knows every other family, every kid knows every other kid, and all the kids mingle together no matter what grade level they are," Newington said. "My child knows everyone, and they work together like family."

"Lots of kids hang out with older kids and younger kids," said student Michael Matousek, 9.

Students follow the Cabrillo Unified School District curriculum. It emphasizes literacy with lots of math, writing and reading workshops, and reading at home.

"It's read, read, read and math, math, math," said Cheryl Coruccini, whose son Nathan is heading into

Kings Mountain School began with the loggers

Kings Mountain traits like independence, self-reliance, taking care of each other and withstanding the elements go far back.

Starting in the 1840s, logging and lumbermen defined Kings Mountain. Using two-man saw blades, dynamite and the donkey engine, they felled trees for lumber or shingles and hauled giant logs by mule or ox teams to the 15 mills operating on the mountain by 1853. The mills moved to fresh groves when an area was timbered out, and their crews set a lasting tone of independence and colorful spirits.

So successful were the loggers that by the early 1900s the mountain was denuded. But there were new residents: dairymen who led gentler lives than the rough lumbermen. They lived in comfortable homes instead of bouncing from one mill to the next. Their womenfolk were not the shady ladies who kept the loggers company. They raised families — and needed schools.

In 1862, according to Kings Mountain undisputed historian Ken Fisher, the Laguna School District formed on the mountain's north side. Eight years later a school sprang up at Summit Springs (an early mountain ghost town) but burned — not uncommon up there.

Six years later, Sheldon P. "Purdy" Pharis, an entrepreneur who made a fortune in shingles, donated lumber for a school and cash for a bell, teacher's platform and desk. It was an odd gesture, as the enigmatic Pharis was a childless bachelor. But the Pharis School District flourished to 1912. Mountain school days were hard. The buildings were primitive and there was high teacher turnover due to harsh living conditions. Children rode horseback to school, missed class to work the farms and handed texts down to younger siblings.

Eventually the dairy families followed teachers' examples and sought easier lives on the Peninsula. A hundred years after the mills, developers subdivided the large mountain parcels. New residents, needing schools, came in.

Families found no schools on the mountain in the 1930s and '40s, so they headed to the 50-plus Bay Area school dis-

tricts for book learning. In September 1949, trustees of the then-Coastside Union District stipulated schools near homes.

So residents set up classes at the Henrik Ibsen Lodge, centerpiece of the local Norwegian community.

On Feb. 14, 1952, the Kings Mountain School opened in a portable on Swett Road, with 14 students and a PTA. Within four years, a second building with classrooms and an office was set up for 40 students. They needed a piano, encyclopedias and equipment, so the PTA raised cash.

The growth of the school reflected that of the world. Legend held that it was run by hippies in the 1960s. It had a farm in the 1980s where students tended stock.

In 1978, Proposition 13 brought a hiccup to the school. The school had brought state money to the district as a "Small, Necessary School" but the proposition did away with that, funding Kings Mountain according to average daily attendance. Some Coastsiders saw inequity in the amount that went to Kings Mountain, and called a meeting

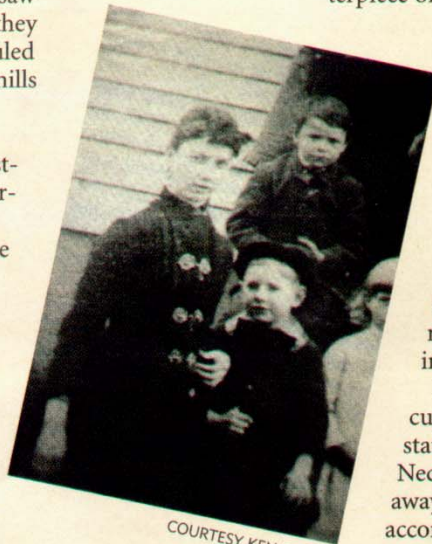
in 1981 involving CUSD officials, Kings Mountain residents, parents and alumni. At issue was \$5,000 which went to Kings Mountain to cover busing and meals, but hardy mountain parents took that on.

Mountain resident and attorney Don Roesch drew up papers creating the nonprofit Kings Mountain Education Fund. The Kings Mountain Art Fair, which supported fire protection and a local volunteer fire brigade since its early days, also stepped up as one of the school's major funders.

"The people on the (art fair) board also sent their kids to Kings Mountain School, and understand that funding can change and there was no other way to deal with shortfalls than to create a foundation for keeping the school's level of excellence intact," she said.

The Education Fund was incorporated in summer 1981, just in time for the art fair.

But the school's real foundation was already laid in. "Long before the Education Fund, it was always a joint proposition between teachers, parents and students," said Fredrikson.



COURTESY KEN FISHER



Kings Mountain Elementary School students follow their teacher back into the classroom after recess.

second grade there. “The amount of reading he is able to do at this age is phenomenal.”

Her husband, Vince, who attended Kings Mountain School beginning at age 4 in 1974, agrees. “The school’s pretty good — you get a lot more attention than at larger schools,” he said.

“You play kickball with kindergartners and then with fifth-graders,” said Kelsey Moore, 14, who attended Kings Mountain from third-through fifth-grade and is now a sophomore at Half Moon Bay High School. “But I got a better education than kids at other schools because the teacher-student ratio was less.”

Combined grades are key to Kings Mountain School’s success, said Eileen Fredrikson, second Kings Mountain Education Fund president. Any class’s typical spectrum of skills is broadened in multi-grade classes, she explained; in a small school, students work at their own pace without stigma.

“There are multiple spelling, reading and math groups. It’s never obvious that someone’s ahead or behind,” she said.

That age mix also fosters security, she added. “Not only do children of all ages play on the playground, dif-

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— Lisa Parral, Education Fund treasurer

ferent ages might have a kindergartner to take care of,” she said. “It gives the children a real sense of belonging and confidence in a way that’s hard to achieve in normal circumstances.”

Do families feel concerned about their kids growing up in a cocoon?

“It never seemed to affect me,” said Vince Coruccini. His transfer to Cunha Intermediate School in Half Moon Bay was “a big culture shock” but he thinks he learned more at Kings Mountain than at larger schools.

Kelsey Moore said that sports and Girl Scouts helped her make friends and get ready for real life.

Does time hang heavy for kids on the quiet mountain? No, say the elders. “Families, on weekends, spend time together,” said Newington. “Not watching TV, but doing things — rid-

ing bikes, spending time with family.

“What do the kids have to do? There’s everything to do here, just not shopping or sitting at a movie,” she continued. “Chasing a cricket, looking for banana slugs. It’s in the woods. A blue jay landed in a picnic lunch (recently) and the kids were just thrilled.”

That idyllic picture of close-to-nature life sounds romantic, but the academic successes are real.

In 1989 Kings Mountain received its first California Distinguished School award, based on the Academic Performance Index related to STAR testing. Schools scoring 800 and up are eligible; Kings Mountain scored 957.

In March, state and San Mateo County Office of Education officials visited when the school became eligi-

ble for a second Distinguished School award. They sought information — and found school life a la Kings Mountain.

Instead of being met by a few school officials, they were greeted by the Fredriksons, alumni, the art fair board and publishers of the mountain's community newsletter, the *Echo*. Instead of a cold lunch, they were feted with a buffet. And then there was the student work.

"They were blown away," said Parral. "They said they had never seen such an outpouring of community support. This kind of thing can't be staged. It's just who you are."

That showed the Kings Mountain secret ingredient: the level of commitment and involvement by parents and community.

Parents go to school

Every school day, from 30 to 40 parents chip in with carpooling, office help, leading field trips, serving as library or classroom aides. Parents help out with science, music and Art in Action lessons that complement the basics — and with maintenance. "There's no janitor — we do that," said parent Amy Kirkowitz, mom of second- and fourth-graders, who also helps in the school library. "Parents are involved in every issue."

"It's a matter of see a need, fill a need," said Moore. "Every parent, every teacher, aides, comes together to make it work."

Parental presence is vital to learning, and parents and teachers mix well, said Fredrikson. "From the beginning, dual classes made it more necessary to have parents in the classroom," she said. "Some teachers felt the parents were always observing them, but the parents do their best to recognize that the teachers are the professionals."

Parents in class get lessons in equal-

ity, she added: "If you've got an MBA or whatever, and what the school needs is for you to cut out paper doilies, that's what you did. Everyone does what's needed."

The parents are also the movers and shakers of "Grandma Jennie's cookies" at the art fair. On Saturday before the fair, scores of parents and friends gather at Wedemeyer's Bakery in South San Francisco to use its industrial-sized ovens and tables to mix, bake and wrap more than 3,500 eight-inch cookies. Named for a real

wagons. The sales bring in about \$10,000, roughly 10 percent of the school's budget.

"It's a great fund-raiser, but more important, it's a way for new parents to get adopted into the community," said Parral. "If you think of the art fair as being the creativity of the mountain, the school is the anchor."

"The whole school runs on volunteers," said Newington.

A tiny mountain school thrives

Families are not charged tuition. The school runs on CUSD funding (allotted per student) that covers teachers, a part-time principal (in 2008-09, Mike Bachicha takes that position) and upkeep. The Education Fund covers day-to-day expenses, Newington's position, aides, and \$1,600 per student per year.

More than 75 percent of parents participate in voluntary donations. They gave \$28,000 this year, and the fair kicked in \$24,000.

This year's Education Fund budget grew 9 percent, allowing it to generate \$120,000 to cover committed programs and resources and construct the new building, dedicated May 15 to Parral.

Recent fundraisers included a kids' run, raffle of a rebuilt classic car for the

second time, a wine tasting, a black-tie gala and a hike led by historian Fisher. They were successful — but challenges remain.

"It's almost like we need an event every month," sighed Moore.

But as history shows, the mountain will rise to meet them.

"It's a special place, a really special place," said Fredrikson. "I think children can do well in all Coastside schools, but ... Kings Mountain just has a distinct flavor because it's so small and (has) wonderful attributes for our community." ✪



King's Mountain Elementary received its second Distinguished School award in 2008 and flies the flag proudly.

Grandma Jennie and her knack for cookies, the one original recipe now includes chocolate chip, peanut butter, oatmeal, toffee crunch and an annual "mystery flavor."

A booth just off the "Grill 56" food area (named for the mountain's volunteer fire brigade number) houses volunteer parents and students selling cookies. Teams of parents and kids traverse the fair pulling cookie-laden