

Angels make a difference at Citrus School

By ROGER H. AYLWORTH - Staff Writer

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CHICO — Citrus School is pretty much like any other school in the region, except for one thing — the angels.

Every classroom at Citrus has at least one angel in residence, and some have several more.

These angels don't come with wings and the only special power they have is love of children, but that power apparently can work its own kind of miracles.

The arrival of angels at Citrus wasn't entirely an accident, but the title wasn't planned.

About five years ago Pam Wear, who is a lay leader of a volunteer program at Bidwell Presbyterian Church, sat down with then Citrus School Principal Cherie McGuire.

Wear remembers telling McGuire, "We would like to adopt a school, and we don't exactly know what that means."

McGuire immediately grasped the concept and began brainstorming a range of things the volunteers could do.

"The first thing she said," according to Wear, "was, 'You are all angels.'"

In a recent interview, at that same table in Citrus School, Wear said the idea of being called "angels"

was kind of embarrassing, but it stuck.

McGuire said she wanted an angel in every classroom to help tutor youngsters, to work the students on study "centers" that cover math reading and other subjects and to do that during teacher prep periods to give the teachers a bit of a break. The volunteers could read to students, could spend time encouraging and supporting them in a range of ways.

By then a somewhat overwhelmed Wear asked, "When can we start?"

"How

about Monday?" replied the principal.

"Oh my gosh! What have we just signed up for?" thought Wear.

Now, about 80 volunteer angels regularly put in an hour a week at the school and another 200 part-time angels are available for special assignments as needed. All of the angels go through all of the fingerprinting and background checks required of on-campus volunteers.

The nature of what the angels did and are doing regularly shifts to meet the needs of the kids.

One angel began teaching students to play the card game cribbage. The after school cribbage training naturally evolved into tournament play, which in turned went on to regional tournaments. This past spring a collection of Citrus cribbage players took part in a regional tournament in Grass Valley.

Wear said the Rev. Steve Schibsted, Bidwell Presbyterian's pastor, came to the church 12 years

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ago with a dedication to provide service to the community, and the advent of the angels prompted him to suggest that a bike be given to every Citrus student.

Michelle Sanchez, who last year replaced the retiring McGuire as principal, said, while the bike idea had merit McGuire wanted to take a slightly different direction.

Instead of just handing out the bikes, according to Sanchez, McGuire wanted to integrate the bicycles into the program as opportunities to serve others and as rewards for accomplishment.

An angel named Nick Cartwright, turned out to have a talent for bike repair, and special education teacher Pam Larrance had students who wanted to learn how to rehabilitate bikes.

Other angels scoured the community, checking with police agencies that had collected abandoned bicycles, and anybody else who could supply used bikes and bike parts.

The bike rehab was another after school effort, but more than bikes were being changed in the process.

Sanchez said the "kids were so proud" of the bike work and it has had an impact on their whole view of coming to school.

To date the school has fixed and given away about 200 bicycles.

The new principal said there have been youngsters "with pretty severe behavior issues" who have blossomed under the personal attention of an angel.

She said just having the adult angels at the school,

who by their presence on campus are telling the youngsters they are important and valuable, has had a dramatic effect.

Sometimes the angels efforts have involved a paintbrush as well as a schoolbook.

One of the first projects was a play area painted on the paved yard behind the school. The project, besides being recreational, helps the youngsters to learn coordination, and right from left, by following the painted path.

Currently a band of angels is in the process of painting the outside of the school that was constructed in 1935 and hasn't had a new exterior paint job since the 1980s.

Wear said the angels work closely with school staff as well as the teachers to make sure nothing they do is in conflict with staff projects or take paid work away from anybody.

The angels have also arranged field trips where the Citrus kids walk to the Chico State University campus to see performances in the Laxson Auditorium.

When they go on these field trips, escorted by, in this case, guardian angels, the students wear their blue Citrus School T-shirts.

"It's pretty cool to see all those blue shirts walking down the street," said Wear.

The principal said she is convinced the angels have had a significant impact on the academic and behavioral life at the school.

She said seeing the students arriving for class and running to hug their angels proves to her the good

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the program has been doing.

"The teachers absolutely love the angels as much as the kids do," said Sanchez.

The principal said she is going to do a statistical comparison of test scores and other indicators, to see if the numbers back up what she can see with her eyes.

Sanchez said she sees future angel efforts that are targeted to specific students, who have specific needs.

After bubbling about what angels have been doing at Citrus, and the universal comment among the angels that they get more than they give, Wear admitted the obvious.

"People have told me, 'When you talk about Citrus, you just glow'."

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