

Education

Where things come from

Suburban school children get a lesson in work from those who do chores not normally seen here.

By Anthony Kim

A visit from a rancher, a miner, a farmer, a forester and a fisherman at Roosevelt Middle School on Thursday was more than a regular career day for students — who were fascinated with these jobs, which seemed so exotic from a city slicker's standpoint.

"It makes me want to try it or do it for a day," said 13-year-old Richie Galvez, following the miner's presentation. "It's different because there's not a lot of miners around here."

Seventh-grader Susanna Sayan, 12, thought being a cattle rancher seemed fun.

"I was curious about how they are living in their ranch," she said. "It's interesting because I've never been there. Here, there are houses and big buildings. I just learned more about a farm and cows."

But a larger message lay behind the lasso lessons, mining gear fittings and wheat-cutting tutorials given to about 600 students during their science class period.

Members of Provider Pals — a nonprofit cultural education organization — brought in guests who get their hands dirty every day to provide the materials many people need for the products they use.

"The message is: Our lives are lot more closely entwined than we would think," said Rick Kuntz, a cattle rancher from Dillon, Montana. "We're responsible for providing the materials for their products ... and it's interesting to have that light go on for the kids."

Students are usually clueless about where their stuff comes from, Kuntz said. And to be sure, the students at Roosevelt weren't regular cowhands, but he was amazed by Roosevelt's students' curiosity, Kuntz said.

"This group was a pleasant surprise — a lot of immigrant students, very ethnically diverse, the great questions they asked," Kuntz said. "Some kids are totally ignorant and naïve, but these students — they were somewhat ignorant and naïve — but they asked questions."

The aim was to educate students on the realities of what it takes to produce the consumer goods we use daily, said program director Chas Vincent, who is also a U.S. representative for Montana's second district.

"Wooden boards don't come from Home Depot and milk doesn't come from cartons from Safeway," Vincent said.

Many people support environmentally friendly policies, but sometimes do not think about what those policies mean, Vincent said.

"We want to work on our computers, but we don't want to destroy the environment ... but someone had to pound that metal out of the ground," he said.

One of the men whose profession is mining for that metal was Clint Jensen, mill maintenance foreman at the Genesis Troy Mine in Troy, Montana.

"We want to teach them that before it comes into the store as [a product], someone had to start the process of growing or mining," Jensen said. "It puts a face to it."

Provider Pals is not a political organization, and they are not anti-environmentalism, Vincent said. They want to inform students about the realities about the world around them at a young age, he said.

Some of that reality was illustrated by Cory Farmer, the forester from Libby, Montana. Farmer brought two pieces of wood — one that grew in a heavily forested area and one that grew in more open land — to demonstrate that the act of cutting down trees itself is not environmentally unfriendly, Farmer said. He takes responsibility for the well-being of the forest, as well — like preventing fires and making sure forest are not overcrowded, he said.

"It was interesting, cool to learn how everything worked and the materials they get," 14-year-old Janet Panosian said. "The rocks were pretty."

She and her classmates were more interested about life in Montana than the message of converging the urban and rural cultures through education, she said.

"I don't like how everything is so far away," said 13-year-old Vandui Kirakossyan. "Some things are like 40 miles away in Montana. But I like snow."

During class Kuntz answered a student's question about what he used to do for fun as a child, which served to illustrate that their worlds weren't so far apart, he said.

"I used to compete in some rodeos ... but for the most part I did high school and junior high school sports, just like you," he told the class.

Eighth-grade science teacher Mary Cook brought the program to Roosevelt Middle School and said it was a valuable learning experience for the students.

"[I introduced this] for them to realize that there are so many things in the world outside of Glendale," Cook said.

Chris Vantyle, a farmer from La Cygne, Kansas, said he hoped the students' eyes were opened up to a different world that is just a few states away from here.

"Hopefully they can say that they know what our life is like and that the world is a place to take care of," he said.

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