

Happy Valley school celebrates 150 years



DAN COYRO — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Happy Valley Elementary's George Purnell and Cheryl Brothers get ready for Happy Valley School's 150th anniversary picnic this weekend.

Small size sets school apart, says superintendent

By Kara Guzman

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SANTA CRUZ » Amongst vineyards and farms in the Santa Cruz Mountains sits Happy Valley Elementary, part of a one-school district founded in 1864.

That's one year after Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, said board president George Purnell, who helped organize the school's 150th anniversary this weekend.

"Around 300 alumni, parents and former teachers are expected for the festivities, which include a barbecue and music on Saturday and awards on Sun-

day, said Purnell.

Originally housed in a red one-room schoolhouse on Branciforte Drive, Happy Valley is the oldest public school in the county, said Purnell. As part of the two-year buildup for the event, Purnell spearheaded a history project, collecting audio interviews and historical photos, some of which are available at hvslegacy.org.

Also as part of the anniversary, the school launched a fundraising campaign for its \$850,000 endowment, with the goal of reaching \$1 million in 2015, said Michelle McKinny, superintendent.

The school draws around

\$30,000 each year from its endowment, which funds three classroom aides, she said. The school's approximately 100 families raise \$100,000 each year to fund three more aides, music and art teachers and a computer lab — a herculean effort, said McKinny. A strong endowment would ease pressure off parents, she said.

With only 135 students, an aide in every classroom, strong parent involvement and the highest 2013 API scores in the county, it's no wonder each grade level has a waitlist of 85 students, according to McKinny. Some parents have even placed their child on the wait-

IF YOU GO

What: Potluck, barbecue, sports and live music on Saturday and Heroes of Happy Valley awards ceremony on Sunday

When and Where: Noon to 8 p.m. Saturday at DeLaveaga Park, 850 Branciforte Drive, Santa Cruz and 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Sunday at Happy Valley Elementary, 3125 Branciforte Drive

Details: To RSVP, visit hvslegacy.org. For details, visit tinyurl.com/hvs150

list at birth, she said.

"It's hard for anybody to fail when you have numbers that are so small," she said. "Everybody knows everybody, from one grade to the next. We have one

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grade to each class level. It becomes so intimate that everyone knows and circles around a kid when somebody needs help."

The school is equipped with smartboards, iPads and Amazon Kindles, but students still get a chance to be children, in three short recesses before lunch, said McKinny.

"Our reputation is out there, and we're proud of it, but at the same time we want to make sure we honor the past," she

said. "This is a little farm school. It's got a lot of technology and a lot of things going on but it's got chickens and it's got life lab (an educational garden), and the kids are out playing all the time."

Payson McNett, a Happy Valley alum and ceramics artist, moved his family from Indiana back to Happy Valley this year, so his daughter, Ruby, could attend kindergarten at his childhood school. When McNett attended the school in the 1990s, he lived on the farm next door with Don and Juanita Leatherman, longtime school volunteers who will

be honored Sunday.

McNett said he has fond memories of planting vegetables in the school's life lab garden, and wanted Ruby to have the same experience.

He also wanted Ruby to have a school that prioritized the arts, he said. His mother, Syndi McNett, painted the school's murals and has volunteered at the school for decades, he said.

"Looking back, I realize how much of an influence that nurturing environment had on me," McNett said. "As a kid, I just assumed that was the experience all kids were get-

ting."

Cheryl Brothers, superintendent from 1980 to 2000, will be one of 13 honored Sunday, as a "hero of Happy Valley." She and her husband donated three giant sequoias and one dawn redwood, which will be planted Sunday, to mark the sesquicentennial.

"When you come out here to Happy Valley School, your heart feels big and it feels encompassed by the entire community," said Brothers. "And that's what makes this place so doggone special. It's just an unbelievable place."