

The Community Takes Over In Live Oak

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School officials are wont to go on at length about community involvement in schools, but in Live Oak, they've done something concrete about the aged problem.

The Live Oak Community School is entering its fifth year of existence, and according to its founder and present director, Mark Seamark, "It's been a fun job, primarily because you get to say 'yes' all the time."

Currently the community school program provides adult education classes, recreation for adults and young people, space for community groups and organizations to meet, and a host of other activities.

"The idea is to determine the wants and needs of the community, and to assist it in developing its own leadership," explains Seamark. "All I have to do is open doors, and then the community takes over."

It is a concept that sounds deceptively simple, and yet has rarely been tried. Live Oak was the first such program in the north county, but now Capitola and Soquel have a community school, and Gault School, Scotts Valley, Bonny Doon and the San Lorenzo Valley are following suit.

"It can work anywhere," as-

serts Seamark. "It is well suited for this area because the district didn't have too many of these kinds of activities before."

Live Oak administrators realized that the schools were being left vacant and useless at the end of the school day, weekends, holidays and vacations. Why not turn them over to the community, asked Seamark, for any activity from weddings and funerals to classes, receptions or family reunions.

"The only problem is space," explains the personable 43-year old former businessman. "We only have three schools, but as long as the activity is non-profit, they're welcome to the space."

Even profit-oriented concerns can use school facilities if they can be squeezed into the tight schedule. "All we ask is to cover our overhead in operational costs," Seamark says, pointing out that last summer the gym at Live Oak was used by a gymnastics club.

"We didn't pick up a lot of bucks," he adds.

What about vandalism, a chief concern of school officials in these days of liberated students? "The beauty of community school programs is that vandalism decreases," reports Seamark. "As the kids get involved in programs, or help laying athletic fields or in pain-

ting the school, I think they're less likely to vandalize. They have a vested interest in keeping things nice."

Even cleaning up after community groups is no problem, says Seamark. In five years, there's been just one clean-up fee of \$5 assessed, and "that's very gratifying."

Since community classes began, there have been over 400 of them, with in excess of 8,000 Santa Cruz area residents attending evening classes alone. This does not include the many informal community groups who might occupy the cafeteria at Del Mar or the multi-purpose room at Live Oak, such as the Live Oak General Plan Advisory Committee (LOGPAC).

This is why Seamark is strongly opposed to any hike in adult education fees, as proposed by the Santa Cruz City School Board. "If we have to have the costs of programs go up as proposed, it will kill our evening program," he promises. Seamark estimates 60 per cent of the 900 adults currently in spring classes live within the boundaries of Live Oak.

"Most of our people can't afford \$13.50 for a class, and won't respond to it. The evening classes get a lot of people into the schools, and I'd hate to lose them."

Seamark describes Live Oak as a "sleeping giant," noting

that once the community became aware of the school concept, it rose to the occasion. "Once the community began to sense that it had power, it realized what it could do as a group. Now they're willing to try more things and see the program improve."

As evidence of community support, Seamark cites last year's passage of a tax levy, the first time one was successful in

years. "Elsewhere in the state, school bonds went down to defeat."

Along with adult programs, the Live Oak Community School stresses children's recreation programs, which began in February for grades kindergarten through fifth on two afternoons per week plus all day Saturday. For older teens, there is a Friday evening drop-in center. "They really do come

in," says Seamark.

The job comes to six days a week, from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m., but Seamark is far from dissatisfied. "You have to have a good time doing it," he smiles.

Live Oak seems to have a good time doing it, too, if a copious list of courses is any indication. But as Seamark points out, "People realize the schools belong to them. They really do."