

MURDER, MAYHEM AND MYSTERY: MAKING FUNDRAISING FUN FOR THE TEACH FOUNDATION

By Hilary Grant

HERE'S THE SCENARIO: YOUR CHILD'S FAVORITE teacher has a terrific idea for an after-school program or enrichment project.

Maybe it's starting a science club, putting together a reading festival or planting an organic vegetable garden at his school. Whatever the idea, it would be cost efficient, pique the interest of hundreds of kids, and be easy to put into place.

But today's sad fact is this: for most teachers, and their eager-to-try-it-out students, the proposal won't happen.

In large part, that's because of a stubborn recession and its continuing, grim toll on primary, secondary and higher education.

Indeed, California legislators say they've been forced to cut billions of dollars in order to close gigantic deficits, but by doing so, public schools can offer only the most basic of curriculums. Like nearly every other school district in the state, San Luis Coastal Unified School District (SLCUSD) has been hit hard – the district lost \$9 million in funding last year, which averages out to \$1,250 per student.

Thankfully, there's some safety net for teachers working for SLCUSD – The TEACH Foundation.

Short for The Endowment for the Advancement of Children, the non-profit is affiliated with the SLO Community Foundation and is now celebrating its 10th anniversary. Since its founding, the group has awarded approximately 275 small grants, totaling close to \$200,000, for use in classrooms and education programs in San Luis Obispo, Morro Bay and Los Osos.

Every school in the district has received at least one grant.

"I bet that most people reading this article had opportunities growing up such as music lessons, trips outside their hometown and visits to museums and plays," says TEACH Board President Judy Philbin, a



former PTA president and parent to two now-grown children who attended SLCUSD schools.

"But the landscape of our community is changing," she continues. "It's now our job at TEACH to provide these positive experiences – whether it's in drama, music and art, health, or a leadership project."

Applications are accepted twice a year, with grant figures ranging from \$250 to \$1,000. That's usually enough for an educator to make his idea happen – and get kids excited about school. Recently funded TEACH activities and/or materials include a robotics kit for Morro Bay High School; culinary knives to supplement home economics classes at SLO High School, and a performance field trip for the Laguna Middle School choir.

To make sure the Foundation can keep doing what it does best – handing out money that makes a real difference – the group is hosting a Mystery Dinner later this month. Billed as "an evening of chaos, mystery and a dose of disorderly conduct," Philbin says she hopes to raise \$25,000.

Set for Saturday, May 14th, from six o'clock in the evening to nine p.m. in the Garden Room at the Madonna Inn, only about 150 tickets are available. The price is \$75 per person, but a small discount can be had if a table of eight is purchased for \$600.

Along with dinner, guests will be treated to a murder-mystery comedy presented by the Arroyo Grande troupe Murder in Mind. Ticket holders are invited to dress in gangster-like attire, or as their favorite "Sopranos" television series character. A silent auction is also part of the festivities.

"We've had a number of fundraisers in the past, with our telethons on public access channels probably being the best known," says Judy



Philbin. "It was a wonderful way to feature our kids, and our projects, but it wasn't a big money-maker.

"This year, our small-but-mighty board decided to put our energies and resources into something different. The mystery dinner is a great choice!"

Several SLCUSD instructors have been awarded more than one grant, which Philbin says is encouraged.

Eva di Santo, who teaches Modern World History and English Learners at SLO High has been the recipient of a handful of TEACH money, mostly requests for imaginative classroom props.

"My most recent grant went toward a set of United Nations flags," says di Santo. "They're going to be displayed around my classroom, and will be especially useful for students who learn best by touch and visualizing.

"I'm all about making my classrooms come alive, and TEACH really helps me to do that."

Fifth grade Baywood Elementary School teacher Wendi Craig used her \$1,000 grant for a one-day math festival in March.

"It was great having all of that funding," she says, "because we were able to divide it up into three parts."

During school hours, Craig says that Baywood kids were able to work at different geometry stations, "getting to play around with math." Immediately after school, all of the instructors were then given the opportunity to hear a lecturer from the California Mathematics Council present ways to make math easier for students to learn. Finally, in the evening, Baywood students brought their parents to the school, where a Family Math Night took place.

"We must have had more than 100 people show up for that," says Craig. "I especially loved watching fifth and sixth graders figuring out math problems with their younger siblings and friends."

With about 40 applications turned in during each grant cycle, TEACH also does its best to interface with the school district, as well as other businesses, so that it can award as many grants as possible.

"Sometimes a request can actually be funded through another source within the district," says Philbin. "Sometimes teachers can combine their efforts. And sometimes a quick

call to a local entrepreneur can meet the need for simple materials.

"After that, we're usually able to fund a reasonable portion of each request."

What would Philbin say to those who, because of hard economic times, only have enough money to donate to a single local non-profit this year?

"We believe that programs that foster learning, self reliance and personal growth provide a life-long benefit for students and

the community," she says. "I also think that many people are frustrated that education has been cut so much, and they wonder what they can do.

"The TEACH Foundation offers a constructive way to make a difference."

Tickets for the TEACH Foundation Mystery Dinner can be purchased online at slocf.org/teachtickets, or by calling (805) 549-6454. Find out more about the TEACH Foundation at theteachfoundation.org.

In March 2010 Colleen McBride was diagnosed with an aggressive, rare form of cancer. In the spirit of Colleen, there will be fundraisers and celebrations to help support the McBride's growing medical expenses.



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