

West Park students get surprise visit from Santa

Autistic students at West Park Elementary are surprised with a visit and gifts from Santa and Mrs. Claus

By Jayati Ramakrishnan • East Oregonian

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Santa Claus, Richard Scarlett, gives a hug to fourth-grader Brayden Fine after passing out gifts in the class Tuesday at West Park Elementary School in Hermiston.



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Students open the presents they receive in the class Tuesday at West Park Elementary School in Hermiston.

Students in West Park Elementary's Social Communications classes were delighted to get a visit from Santa, who stopped by Tuesday morning to deliver some Christmas gifts.

And some couldn't believe their eyes.

"This is the first time I ever met Santa before," said Jackson Ryan, a fourth grader wearing a Sonic the Hedgehog cap under his Santa hat.

The surprise was furnished by the Hermiston Board of Realtors, who collected funds and purchased gifts for the class. All the students in the class are autistic.

Santa and Mrs. Claus, played by Richard Scarlett and Wanda Hunt, individually greeted each child in the class, handing out a candy cane, a hat, and a gift. They also read the students a classic holiday story — “The Night Before Christmas.”

Christmas spirit was high in the classroom, with students singing carols and eagerly opening gifts on the last day before holiday break.

Brayden Fine, a fourth grader, was excited about his gifts, but told Santa what he thinks the season is really about.

“Christmas isn’t about toys,” he said. “It’s about loving and helping other people.”

The students in the program range from kindergarten to fifth grade. The district decided last year to move students from Highland Hills Elementary School to West Park.

Jeana Beck of the Hermiston Board of Realtors said she started collecting money for the gifts when the two classes were unexpectedly moved, and the students were having a hard time with the transition. One of their teachers, Suzanne Beck, began looking for a way to make the move easier and surprise the students for Christmas.

“Suzanne didn’t have funding, so she asked me for help. I said ‘yes,’ and started asking around the Board of Realtors,” said Jeana, who is Suzanne’s sister-in-law and has an autistic son. “I had \$700 within 48 hours.”

Suzanne said she had her students write letters asking for certain gifts, and the teachers put together a small catalog from which students could pick out things they wanted.

“We’re working on the transition (between schools), this is just a little bump up for them,” she said.

Scarlett and Hunt — who met at West Park Elementary in the first grade — have been dressing up as Santa and Mrs. Claus and making visits to local schools, hospitals and retirement homes for 12 years.

“We did 15 different places this year,” Scarlett said. “It’s just so much fun.”

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