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In search of the Great Pumpkin

Elementary schools take time out to learn about a working farm

By Ryan Pfeil

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One morning every October, Ashland's Bear Creek Greenway echoes with the stomp of shoes, the grind of wagon wheels and a symphony of voices young and old.

Their destination is a pumpkin patch at the end of the path, intersected by Valley View Road. After visiting, all the children will hold pumpkins in their laps for the bus ride back to school.

This year, the day fell on Friday.

Chris Abbott-Stokes, a kindergarten teacher at Walker Elementary, looks forward to it all year.

"[We do this] so they can see a real farm," Stokes said, "and have a chance to be in the outdoors — to have an understanding that food is not just bought at the supermarket."

Ron Roth, co-owner of Gepetto's restaurant in Ashland, organizes the event.

The first pumpkin walk took place 20 years ago. The former manager of the farm, Lynn Lesjack, invited her friend, an elementary school teacher, to the farm to pick pumpkins. Only that class came that year.

Since then, news of the walk has spread all over the Rogue Valley. Elementary schools, Head Start operations and the Willow Wind Community Learning Center in Ashland now attend the annual event.

"These kids are going to learn more out here today than they'd learn in a classroom," Roth said.

Kids are only allowed to have the pumpkin if they can carry it without assistance. But of course, a lot of them try to pick up the biggest ones. Later, if there's time, they have the opportunity to pick their own grapes in the nearby fields.

In addition to the pumpkin walk, Roth is part of the Eagle Mill Farming Project. The project is a nonprofit organization that gets grants from Ashland Co-Op, Carpenter Foundation and **Gordon Elwood Foundation**. With supervision, elementary students pick vegetables and cook their own meals in the farm's harvest kitchen. Kids also plant their own pumpkins in the spring. They are taught proper planting techniques.



A kindergarten class from Walker Elementary School gets ready to enter the pumpkin patch along the Bear Creek Greenway.

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“These kids are going to learn more out here today than they’d learn in a classroom,” Roth said. “It’s hard to train 6-year-olds to be gardeners, but the concept of putting seeds in the ground — they can do that.”

Christina Ammon is the grant-writer and charity coordinator for the project, in addition to being a pumpkin patch guide for the schools.

“This time of year, you’re getting tired after a summer of work, this renews my appreciation,” Ammon said. “Seeing it through kids’ eyes makes it new again.”

Both Roth and Ammon hope to get a full harvest kitchen facility for the farm. The facility would include professional equipment for the harvest meals they offer to the kids that visit the farm. Ammon is seeking more grants from additional local charity groups.

“When [charities] come out here and see it, they get excited,” Ammon said. “When you present it in proposals, it’s a little harder to understand.”

“A lot of teachers will tell me this is their favorite field trip,” Roth said. “It’s one of the high points of the year.”

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