



Happy Valley Community BBQ Revives Tradition and Raises \$50,000 for the School and its Students



Photos taken by Carlie Statsky

After a seven-year hiatus, the Happy Valley Elementary School District community gathered once again on May 3rd to celebrate the return of a cherished tradition, the Happy Valley Community BBQ.

What began as a hallmark event for the rural community in Santa Cruz County returned this spring with overwhelming support. The event drew hundreds of attendees, reconnected alumni, and raised an extraordinary \$50,000 for students and programs at the small school district.

For Superintendent Michelle Stewart, the event represented more than a fundraiser. It was an opportunity to restore the community identity that has long defined Happy Valley.

“Happy Valley School has always been one of the places that brought the community together,” Superintendent Michelle Stewart shared. “There’s really nothing else here, no businesses, no gas stations, no gathering places. The school has always been the center of the community.”



Happy Valley Elementary School District serves around 100 students and families who are connected to the school and its traditions. Years ago, the community regularly hosted large gatherings that included live music, barbecues, games, and multi-day celebrations. Those events gradually faded over time, and after longtime community leader George Purnell's departure in 2019, followed closely by the COVID-19 pandemic, the annual barbecue tradition came to a halt.

Planning for the event began in late fall and intensified in January with weekly meetings. The committee included two board members, several parents, the Parent Club president, and longtime community advocate George Purnell, affectionately known as the “Mayor of Happy Valley.”



“Mayor of Happy Valley” George Purnell

This event would not have been possible without amazing sponsors. According to Michelle Stewart, many of the funds raised came from community sponsors and silent auction donations, helping elevate the event far beyond a typical school fundraiser.

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The event itself featured something for everyone. Families enjoyed a petting zoo with baby goats and a calf from a local creamery, horseback rides, bounce houses, and raffle prizes. There were also silent auctions, cakewalks, popcorn, cotton candy, and classic carnival-style games. Students also participated in a milk label contest.

The atmosphere throughout the day reflected the nostalgia and community spirit organizers had hoped to recreate.

Alumni returned to campus to reconnect with former classmates and neighbors. Longtime residents reminisced about the large community gatherings of years past.

“I only heard positive things from people afterward,” Michelle Stewart said. “People kept saying, ‘This reminded us of the old days.’ Alumni who hadn’t seen each other in years came back and reconnected. One of our board members even said he thought this event was better than what they used to do before.”

Michelle Stewart’s husband, who is retiring as a local high school band director, brought his jazz band to perform, while additional community-connected bands played throughout the day.





“It was really special because while the bands were playing, the kids were still running around doing games and activities,” Michelle Stewart shared. “It just created this really fun atmosphere for everyone.”

A highlight of the evening was the induction of a new “Hero of Happy Valley,” an honor recognizing individuals who have dedicated years of service and volunteerism to the community. This year’s recognition carried added significance as George Purnell himself was honored for his decades of leadership and commitment to the district.

Among his many contributions, Purnell helped establish the district’s endowment fund, which has grown to more than \$2 million. The endowment helps support and preserve the district’s small class sizes.

During the barbecue, they held a silent auction that raised \$50,000. Funds raised at the barbecue will support multiple district priorities. Portions of the proceeds will go toward the district’s endowment fund, which supports classroom aides, Parent Club programming, and district operational needs.

These funds will also help offset costs associated with recently completed campus bathroom modernization projects.

The event also highlighted the power of student leadership and volunteerism. Older students spent hours helping set up activities, organizing games, and supporting younger children throughout the event.

Michelle Stewart shared that fifth and sixth-graders were helping out as well. “They were running errands, setting things up, and helping wherever they could. They loved being involved and feeling like they were contributing.”

That sense of ownership and belonging is exactly what district leaders hoped the barbecue would reinforce.

“When you’re a small school, relationships matter so much,” Michelle Stewart said. “Families choose to be here. We’re a district of about 60 families, and when people come together socially like this, it builds trust and connection. It makes everything stronger, not just the fun events, but even the harder conversations and challenges that schools sometimes face.”

The success of this year’s barbecue has already inspired conversations about expanding future fundraising and community-building efforts. Organizers are



considering additional donor outreach, a future adults-only gala, and ways to continue growing the “Heroes of Happy Valley” legacy initiative.

Most importantly, the community BBQ is officially back.

“We learned a lot, and now we have a core group of people who know how to make it happen,” Michelle Stewart said. “It took a lot of work, but it was worth every minute. Seeing the community together again, seeing the kids having fun and hearing how much it meant to people, that’s what made it special.”