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A Community That Cares Together

By Katie Evans, Staff Reporter

Jan 31, 2020



Left to Right: Michelle Stewart (Scotts Valley Unified School District Assistant Superintendent), George Haas (Scotts Valley Senior Life Association Vice President), and Jackson Sutter (IB Senior) outside of Scotts Valley High School.

Community connections between our young and the older members are developing throughout Scotts Valley, due to a blossoming partnership between Scotts Valley High School and the Scotts Valley Senior Life Association. I met with Michelle Stewart, SVUSD Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services and George Haas, Vice President of the Scotts Valley Senior Life Association. While we chatted about Stewart and Haas' hopes for the new partnership, Jackson Sutter, a SVHS senior and IB candidate, filmed and occasionally chimed in with his own personal perspective on the new partnership. SVSLA is a nonprofit that focuses on the education and health of senior citizens throughout Scotts Valley. They provide AED defibrillators throughout the community, umbrellas throughout the senior center, and they sponsor workshops, like an upcoming Election Information Program on January 25th.

In his daily life, Haas is a financial planner, specializing in life insurance and annuities. Haas mused on his philanthropic motivations, "For one, I'm a senior... I'm closely connected with the Scotts Valley Senior Center and was referred to the SVSLA... I've found that the more I connect

with people, the more I can connect people with each other in symbiotic relationships. Now, it seems as though I'm becoming a community organizer of sorts. Making it up as I go along... Despite how busy I am during my regular work, I'm just really drawn to volunteer service." Haas is particularly excited about this new program because he likes "to see... how the SVUSD can give back to the community."

Haas has lived in Scotts Valley for 30 years. Both his children attended Scotts Valley High School and Stewart was their principal when they attended Vine Hill Elementary. According to Stewart, she and Haas "recently reconnected when we began talking about getting senior citizens getting involved in our schools." Haas recounted to me how they got back in touch. "Last year Michelle came to our association and was looking to us as a connection between Scotts Valley students and the senior community." Stewart vocalized her hope for Scotts Valley seniors, "I think our senior citizens have so much to offer. Just because they're not working anymore doesn't mean that they don't still want to be involved. I also think a lot of our children don't necessarily have older people in their lives... or on the other hand, their biggest connections are with older people, so an older person in the classroom can give them a real sense of calm, connection, and home."

Haas was extremely inspired by Stewart's suggestion, "We were really energized by having Michelle present an idea like that to our group. We're always looking for opportunities to help the community." He was simultaneously struck by other events around the community. Haas mentioned the exhibit, "We're Still Here," in the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History as an inspiration for the program. The installation made him realize how many seniors are "lonely in the community." Around the same time, Haas heard on NPR that many seniors are low income and struggle to afford basic needs. He explained, "We combined the two ideas and came up with the program." Haas chatted with Stewart, who directed him to David Crawford, the IB and Community Service Coordinator at SVHS. "Dave has a lot of energy and a lot of great ideas. His recommendation was to start with Interact Club, a rotary group that's already established on campus.

Initially Stewart was hoping to begin an "Adopt a Grandparent" program, but Haas and Stewart quickly realized it was too difficult to navigate "the rules and regulations, training, insurance, and expenses.... To protect the students, volunteers, and homes students would be entering." They've also considered reaching out to seniors in the community to get more volunteers in kindergarten classrooms. Recently kindergarten programs in SVUSD have become full day instead of half day and many teachers are requesting more hands to manage the longer hours. However, as you'd expect, it's quite expensive and complicated to be approved as a classroom helper. While the idea has "stalled a little," Stewart and Haas "hope this program can be the impetus" to raise money to get more seniors approved to work in Kindergarten classrooms.

Haas continued to bounce more ideas and eventually, with the help of Deb Gissing, a SVHS volunteer and friend, realized creating care packages would be a fun, easy, and effective way to connect with the senior community. Haas further describes the care packages as "personalized, from one of the kids to one of the seniors." Both the SVSLA and the SVHS Interact Club are currently in the fundraising stage, which will be used to gather materials for care packages. The

SVHS Interact Club is learning how to create a GoFundMe campaign, “It’s a learning experience for both me and the students. I like to see their involvement, so they can see firsthand what it takes to put together a program like this... Once we figure out what goes into the care package, we can set goals for our campaign.”

Both Haas and Stewart see this program as a jumping block for more connections. Stewart hopes that these care packages “will open the door for both students to visit senior centers and for seniors to become involved at our schools. We need help at sporting events, during the school day, different activities...” Haas is currently in communication with Valley Churches United, Community Bridges, and Grey Bears. He is planning a training session between SVHS and the aforementioned groups so SVHS students can be “more aware of ways to earn their 15 hours of mandatory community service.”

If you’d like to get involved, the Scotts Valley Senior Life Association, a 501(c)3 non-profit, gladly accepts tax deductible donations. They can be sent to P.O. Box 66438 Scotts Valley, CA 95067. You can learn more about the SVSLA at <http://scottsvalleyseniorlife.org/> or call Dave Hodgin, the SVSLA President at (831)438-1000 with further questions. The SVSLA is also looking for new board members to expand outreach. If you’d like to donate for care packages, search for “Adopt A Scotts Valley Senior” at [GoFundMe.com](https://www.gofundme.com).

Scotts Valley Senior Life Association and SVHS’ Senior Care Packages

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The SVSLA Board (from left to right): Dave Hodgin, President, George Haas, Vice President, Maxine McCarthy, Morris Barenfus, and Dave Bengston, Treasurer.

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