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Orinda Mayor Steps Out to Help Shape Tomorrow's Leaders

By Laurie Snyder



Mayor of Orinda Sue Severson here to speak to government classes.

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Principal Adam Clark showed his civic pride Jan. 15, alerting the Twitterverse to Orinda Mayor Sue Severson's talk at Miramonte High School by adding "#edchat" - one of the hashtags used nationwide to help teachers cull tips and ideas from among the millions of messages tweeted daily.

especially in the House. All of them said what they learned would not have been possible without the simulation."

According to Severson, Selway first reached out for help with the local component about five years ago. Severson begins with a 15-minute PowerPoint, outlining Orinda government operations. Selway adds context. The class then breaks into four groups to analyze real-time problems devised by Severson. Students brainstorm solutions to issues affecting the Parks and Recreation Department, Traffic Safety Advisory Commission and other Orinda government units.

"It's important for students to feel that their civic involvement could have a direct impact. A letter to a legislator may be one of thousands," said Selway, but in Orinda, students have greater interaction and satisfaction because Severson "gets the students' feedback on local issues ... which she then summarizes and presents to the Orinda City Council. "It is empowering for students to see their input actually making a difference."

"I've found historically that any time you have a student engaged in their learning they're going to come out better informed on the other side of it," whether in science or government, observed Severson. The last census showed that teens currently make up roughly a third of Orinda's population. "I try to impress upon them that their voices are important."

They've clearly gotten the message. Selway's students have been spotted at recent town hall events sponsored by U.S. Congressman George Miller and California Senator Mark DeSaulnier, and have even spoken up at Orinda City Council meetings.

"We need to be impressed and feel okay about the next generation," stressed Severson. "These are bright kids; they're good kids; they like to volunteer, be charitable. We should be proud of them. They're brave; they're articulate. They're tomorrow's leaders."

"Mayor of Orinda Sue Severson here to speak to government classes," tweeted Adam Clark, principal of Miramonte High School. With a mere 108 characters, Clark advised locals that the mayor was on campus Jan. 15, and showed educators nationwide why Orinda's schools are so widely respected.

"It's important for students to see the connection between federal, state and local government. I teach the U.S. federal government through formal instruction and simulation. Students then apply what they learned and research the branches of California state government," explained MHS teacher Meghan Selway when contacted about the tweet. "I close out each branch with students researching another country and discussing similarities and differences." During election years, this may change with the added influx of current events-type news, but the local component always remains part of the mix.

"This year after a simulation of how a bill becomes a law, I received the most insightful reflections on the legislative process. Students said that they now realize that getting things done in Congress is not as easy as it looks to the general American public." Most, said Selway, felt they "now understood the different directions a legislator can be pulled and why Congress deadlocked on the budget. The students themselves could not agree on funding bills during our simulation. Others were critical of the majority and minority party process and commented on the undemocratic aspect of a majority party's power

Reach the reporter at: laurie@lamorindaweekly.com

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