

Students learn where food comes from, thank farmers

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Mills River Elementary third-grader Kayla Lee dug into her special Thanksgiving-themed lunch Thursday afternoon, surrounded by fellow students and parents who gathered at the school for a “Thanks to Farmers” event.

The group feasted on turkey with stuffing, mashed potatoes, green beans, baked apples and pumpkin pie.

“It’s really good,” Kayla said. “I love pumpkin pie. That’s my favorite kind of pie.”

The event was organized by K-5 teacher Mandi Fletcher in partnership with the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project. ASAP, headquartered in Asheville, works with schools in the region to help them source more cafeteria food locally and teach students about where their food comes from as part of its “Farm to School” program.

The event Thursday was Fletcher’s idea. She helped students write thank-you letters to farmers during class before lunch, and invited more than a half-dozen Henderson County farms to set up exhibits in the school hallway. On the way to lunch the children stopped to talk with the farmers to learn about locally grown honey, eggs, vegetables, fruits and farm animals.

“I learned that farmers feed pigs and stuff,” Kayla said. “Bacon, pork and pork chops come from pigs. Last week we tried sweet potato sticks and learned where they come from. Farmers grow and pick the potatoes then they cut them up and cook them.”

Kayla added that it was the first time she had tried sweet potato sticks. “They were good! They had a bit of sugar to them.”

“The main objective of the event was for the kids to put a farmer’s face to a product, because kids don’t know where their food comes from nowadays,” Fletcher said. “I wanted them to know that when they’re eating their broccoli, that someone worked hard to grow that broccoli. We also wanted to get parents involved as well — for them to know that there are people in our community who work hard every day to grow the food that we eat.”

“A lot of the kids made thank-you notes in their classes beforehand and I think a lot of the farmers were touched that we care about them and appreciate what they’re doing.”

Mills River Elementary staff started working with ASAP in-depth this year.

“Before school got out last year, (ASAP) took all the teachers on a field trip to a farm



Patrick Sullivan/Times-News

Ken Cole talks Thursday with students at Mills River Elementary about farming.

and that was very enlightening and got our brains focused on farming and how important it is in our local community,” Fletcher said. “Then we started off this year with an ASAP training session. ASAP folks have come in and done some workshops on cooking in the classroom, and they provide us with monthly recipe cards that we send home with the kids that correlate with our food or vegetable of the month. It’s an easy recipe the kids can cook with their parents at home, or we can cook in the classroom.”

Third-grader Savannah Meeker had polished off her green beans before anything else on her lunch plate, making her mom, Sharon, proud.

“Her dad has a farm, and Savannah would eat beans raw out of the garden,” she said. “He grows onions, green beans, potatoes and garlic,” so Savannah knows where those vegetables come from.

What about the turkey on her plate? “Do turkeys grow on trees like apples, or do they come from the dirt like potatoes?” she was asked.

Shocked, Savannah responded, “Neither! Turkeys come from eggs!”

ASAP Program Coordinator Brittany Wager said most kids today “have a disconnect as to where their food comes from, especially if they eat a lot of processed foods. Mills River has a rich agricultural history, and we’re really trying to keep that alive by teaching kids about how their food is grown by people who live around them.”

Recently, Mills River teacher Meghan Farmer made cucumber sandwiches in her first-grade classroom.

“After talking about how cucumbers grow, we gave students the ingredients and had them make their own sandwiches. They even cut their own cucumbers,” she said.

First-grade teachers at the school have also planted lettuce seeds in their classrooms. “We will be watching how each of these different types (of lettuce) grow, comparing and contrasting, measuring and, last, tasting,” Farmer added.

Every Friday, Farmer and other teachers at the school plan lessons based on the fruit or vegetable of the month. “The resource that we use is the ASAP Farm to School website,” she explained. “We recently had an apple market, which incorporated economics and math. Students brought in local apples from the apple festival and they sold them to each other, thinking about supply and demand, consumers and producers.”

ASAP received a U.S. Department of Agriculture grant of more than \$97,000 in February to supply Henderson, Haywood and Buncombe county schools with seeds to plant, recipe cards, lesson plans and direct connections with growers for food-related classroom activities and cafeteria supplies.

ASAP also encourages the integration of school gardens as outdoor classrooms, conducts monthly student taste tests in school cafeterias and leads field trips to local farms.

Kirby Johnson was at Thursday’s event representing Flavor 1st, a ninth-generation farm in Mills River. His family owns three farms and partners with numerous others throughout the Southeast.

“I am farming some of the same ground that my forefathers farmed,” he said. “It’s all I’ve ever done.”

He sells to a distributor who supplies local schools and also sells direct to the public every Saturday at the Mills River Farmers Market. Tomato season is on the wane, so

Johnson is looking forward to peppers, cucumbers, green beans, squash and zucchini from his partner farms in Florida.

He was more than happy to teach students about his produce and what it's like to be a farmer.

"I'll promote anything I can to get the younger kids interested in farming," he said. "Between my father's generation and my generation, there are a lot of grandkids, but I'm the only one farming. I don't want to lose that" heritage, he said.

At a nearby table, Tracy Redick, office manager at North Mills River Farms, said she "wanted to let the kids see what we do and where we grow food." Her company has 1,500 acres of farmland spread throughout Henderson, Buncombe and Transylvania counties. The company has also started an agritourism program, which involves kids and adults visiting farms for horseback rides, hay rides, river tubing, a corn maze, camping and pick-your-own vegetable days.

This year's agritourism season ended in October, Redick said, but will resume in May.

She stood by a bale of hay and bags of dried corn, cornmeal and wheat that the kids loved running their hands through.

"It feels bumpy and dry," first-grader Noah Johnson said of the cornmeal. Several students commented on the earthy smell of the hay bale.

"One child asked me if there was cow manure in the bags because they smelled the hay," Redick said. "This has been a wonderful event and the kids are so precious."

Nearby, Linda Brittain of Brittain Farms in Mills River showed off a display of duck eggs, chicken eggs, kale and taso, an Asian spinach mustard green that only one person in the crowd all day recognized.

"Kids today are so removed from the growing process and what food looks like in its natural state" that sometimes they don't even recognize foods they might eat regularly. The more they learn about locally grown food, "the more they can make healthier choices," she said.

As part of the Farm to School program, Brittain and a fellow farmer visited a third-grade class earlier in the year with chickens, ducks, eggs and vegetables. The kids cracked open the eggs to compare duck eggs to chicken eggs, and taste-tasted raw kale.

"Most of them liked it," Brittain said with a smile. "The Farm to School program is a really good idea because it puts a farmer's face to the product. It lets kids know that food doesn't just magically appear on supermarket shelves."

First-grader Montanna Compton-Biden said she enjoyed meeting the farmers and learning more about food. "We watched a video about farming in class," she said. "I learned that tractors take care of the farm and they spray stuff to keep the bugs away."

What does she think would be the hardest part of being a farmer? "I think it would be hard to clean up all the poop. I had to do that the first day I got my new dog, Rosco."

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