

Kids get a hands-on understanding of agriculture

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VENTURA, Calif. - Shaun McLaughlin of Junipero Serra School in Ventura didn't just turn 8 on Tuesday.

The second-grader, along with hundreds of other students from his school, got to hold a baby chicken, pet a horse, grind corn, climb a tractor, learn about turkeys, collect eggs, milk a pretend cow and sample some unusual fruits and vegetables.

The activities were part of the 13th annual Farm Day, organized by the Ventura Chapter of the California Women in Agriculture and held each year at an elementary school in the county. Representatives of farming and related industries give children a hands-on understanding of agriculture during the event.

For Shaun, though, the dizzying array of outdoor activity stations were also a complement to his birthday.

“I lucked out,” he said, grinning broadly as his class finished a 10-minute presentation from a representative from Vanoni Farm, during which the youngsters got to taste kumquats and learn about giant grapefruit and citron fruits. “It’s awesome. We get to learn, eat food, see the animals. It’s been a really fun experience.”

About 850 children attended Farm Day, including students from nearby Citrus Glen School and the Triton Academy for special needs children in Camarillo. Representatives from 32 businesses, farming families, nonprofit groups, government agencies and other organizations involved in agriculture provided information and activities. The event lasted four hours, with classes spending about 10 minutes at each station.

“They learn about agriculture. They learn that brown eggs come from brown chickens, and where the milk comes from a cow, and chickens lay their eggs in a nest, and what do farm laborers get paid and what instruments do they use,” organizer Mary Vanoni said. “I learn something every year, so I know these kids are learning a lot.”

Junipero Serra Principal Jim Sather said he was thrilled when Vanoni contacted him roughly a month ago about hosting the event at his school for the first time. He said students were excited when they heard about it, and he saw it as an opportunity for them to learn more about where their food comes from.

“We are very fortunate to have our kids exposed to this,” he said. “Farming is such a big part of the history of our county, and it’s also a big part of the future of our county. I think it’s great that kids are learning about what goes into farming.”

Second-grade teacher Kathy Hickle was delighted, too, as she watched her students listening with heads tilted and hands raised to ask questions at the Vanoni Farms station.

“You can probably see the unbelievable enthusiasm,” she said. “I can’t wait to go back and have them write about it, tell me their favorite part.”

Abbie Vollmer, 7, almost danced with excitement as she finished petting two horses from the mounted unit of the Ventura County Sheriff’s Office.

“They were so soft,” she exclaimed. “It’s just great to have an opportunity to learn about all the different farm animals.”

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