Cabrillo tour gives students a taste of college

By TODD GUILD
OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

APTOS — For 3,000 Santa Cruz County fourth-grades, going to college may have gotten just a little easier.

That’s thanks to the Santa Cruz County College Commitment Fourth Grade Experience, a program began last year and run by all Santa Cruz County K-12 school districts, Cabrillo College, CSU Monterey Bay, San Jose State University and UC Santa Cruz.

“I felt pretty good about it,” said Freedom Elementary School student Brianna Zamora after the half-day tour of the campus. “I want to go to college.”

The program was launched to give kids a picture of college life and encourage them to work toward a college education.

“When you’re big it’s important to come to college, because it’s important to learn stuff you don’t know,” said Ohlone student Miguel Ocampo as he walked back to his waiting bus. “You can get a job if you’re a little smarter.”

The kids started their three-hour tour in Cabrillo’s Carl Connelly Stadium, and then took a tour of the campus.

They saw a dance performance and a theatrical improv work by Cabrillo students.

They ended the day in a “classroom experience,” where they engaged in several activities and discussions.

“We learned that we can take any classes we want,” said Ohlone Elementary School fourth-grader Elian Ibarra.

Freedom Elementary student Lizette Zavala, who said she wants to be an art teacher, called the tour “fun,” while her sister Linette Zavala, a future singer, said she expects to learn “a lot” in college.

“We could have a career if we go to college,” she said.

Ohlone Elementary School teacher Lisa Woodhouse said the experience was important, particularly for Pajaro Valley students.

“Many parents may not have had the opportunity for an education, and their kids may not have the type of mentorship that kids in more affluent areas might have,” she said. “This gets their foot in the door.”

Freedom Elementary fourth grader Anayeli Gonzalez said she enjoyed a discussion about making and running a lemonade stand.

“I think I learned that I want to go to college,” she said. “It was fun being in the football stadium and the library.”

In another classroom, students used candy bars to launch a discussion about the myriad careers behind the candy industry.

“I learned how crunchy candy is made,” said Jessica Burtman-Moran, 9. “I’m glad I came here today. I want to go to Cabrillo College some day and take an art class and a cooking class.”

Mintie White Elementary School teacher Melissa Shaw said she felt the visit was “very successful.”

“It was really a great opportunity to introduce these kids to higher education,” she said. “A lot of these students are already talking about what classes they’d like to take. It was a challenging visit with so many students, but rewarding.”

Anthony Graham was serving as a substitute teacher for Ohlone students.

“I think the kids really enjoyed their visit,” he said at the end of the tour. “This is good for these kids. I give the tour a thumbs-up. The students were entertained and interested.”

The Santa Cruz County College Commitment was launched in earnest last year when former county resident Barbara Samper donated $1 million to the program.

Samper, a Danville resident, said her family’s roots date back to the 1860s, when her great-great-grandfather built many buildings in Santa Cruz.

She built a home in Capitola, which she sold 15 years later, using the $3 million proceeds to start her charity, the Barbara Samper Foundation.

On a drive from Danville to Santa Cruz she stopped for a rest and watched a group of farm laborers working in a field.

“I wanted to find something I could contribute to that would help migrant workers’ children,” she said during a 2012 press conference.

When Samper heard about Santa Cruz County College Commitment she knew she wanted to help.

“I don’t think there is anywhere in this country that the teachers and professors get together and decide that they want to work for everyone being prepared to go to college,” she said. “I’ve never heard of anything like this.”

In addition to supporting student scholarships, Samper’s financial support has supported Cabrillo’s Visual and Performing Arts program as well as the ongoing maintenance of Cabrillo’s Music Recital Hall.