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Bonita Unified Elementary Students Celebrate Diversity During Annual ‘Be You’ Festival

SAN DIMAS/LA VERNE – Gladstone Elementary School held its annual “Be You” Night on April 17, an all-inclusive family celebration sponsored by the Gladstone PTA that focuses on embracing neurodiversity and encouraging Gladstone students to be accepting of classmates that think and act differently than they do, including students with autism and other neurodevelopmental conditions.

The Gladstone campus was a buzz of activity, with students playing hopscotch with hula hoops, navigating an obstacle course, shooting hoops, making multi-colored rainsticks and sensory bottles, relaxing with a therapy dog and playing with animals in the petting zoo.

“‘Be You’ Night is a celebration of inclusiveness and individuality,” BUSD Senior Director of Specialized Services Danielle Walker said. “Our message to students and families is that we share a common goal of supporting each other with empathy and kindness.”

When families arrived to “Be You” Night they checked in at the Communication Station, where students received instructions for an educational scavenger hunt. Using a communication board filled with visual prompts they could point at, and without speaking, students collected scavenger items like rings and stamps at festival stations, then returned to the Communication Station to receive a gift bag.

The most popular attractions were the petting zoo – where students mingled with baby goats, pigs, chickens, ducks and a llama – and a visit with Sunny the therapy dog, a droopy-eyed basset hound from the Chino Hills-based service organization Paws 4 Success, brought to the festival by volunteer Cristine Smith.

“Children respond very well to animals, and the animals make them feel relaxed and comfortable,” Smith said. “Therapy animals are excellent for helping children learn. They don’t judge or correct children, they just help them feel supported. Therapy animals also go a long way in teaching children how to be empathetic.”

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Parents also received information on neurodivergence – what it is, how to adopt an inclusive philosophy, how words matter, and how to advance from awareness to acceptance. Neurodiversity, not just limited to students with autism, includes Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, Tourette’s Syndrome and other neurological conditions.

Gladstone was recently cited as a California Autism Professional Training and Information Network (CAPTAIN) demonstration school, recognizing the work the school has been doing to develop exemplary programs that can serve as demonstration sites for other programs in the area. Gladstone not only enrolls students from within Bonita Unified, but also hosts students throughout the East San Gabriel Valley Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA).

“Be You’ Night is a way to celebrate our similarities, rather than focusing on our differences, and let our kids know that it’s okay to be themselves,” East San Gabriel Valley SELPA Program Administrator Jennifer Wolfe said. “We are grateful for the Gladstone PTA, who have been very supportive and worked hard to make this a night for all of our families to remember.”

PHOTOS:

BUSD_BEYOU1: Gladstone Elementary School students relax with Sunny the therapy dog during the school’s annual “Be You” Night, an all-inclusive family celebration focused on embracing neurodiversity and encouraging Gladstone students to be accepting of classmates that think and act differently than they do, including students with autism and other neurodevelopmental conditions.

BUSD_BEYOU2: Gladstone Elementary School students take a selfie with the Gladstone Griffin during the school’s annual “Be You” Night, which celebrates inclusiveness and individuality. Students played hopscotch with hula hoops, navigated an obstacle course, shot hoops, made multi-colored rainsticks and sensory bottles, relaxed with a therapy dog and played with animals in the petting zoo.

BUSD_BEYOU3: A Gladstone Elementary School student is all smiles while he colors in a drawing with his mother during the school’s annual “Be You” Night, which included games and activities appropriate for children with neurodivergent conditions. Gladstone was recently named an East San Gabriel Valley SELPA CAPTAIN demonstration site, recognizing the work the school has done to develop exemplary programs for children with autism and other neurological conditions.

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