At Large in Ballard: Penny for your thoughts

By Peggy Sturdivant
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It was one of the best meetings I’ve attended in years. Eight fifth-graders at Adams Elementary School gave up their lunch period to meet with me in a circle of chairs in the main office to discuss the third year launch of the Penny Harvest Program. Their enthusiasm and sincerity was as bright as a new penny itself.

Adams Elementary is one of more than 50 local schools participating in the national Common Cents program, administered locally by community non-profit Solid Ground in Wallingford.

Through Thanksgiving, all grades will collect pennies with a goal of 25 sacks. The rationale is that all households, no matter what income level, have pennies. By getting them out of the pickle jars and into a bank, they become valuable again.

However, the pennies are just a means to the end – the first stage of a service-learning project that teaches children how to research and have an effect on issues facing their community.

At Adams fourth and fifth-grade students have to apply to be part of the Penny Harvest leadership team. In the winter and spring, they meet for the collaborative process of apportioning their “grant” money to the community, usually $1,000 to $1,200 per school.

Bobbi Windus is in her third year as parent coordinator for Penny Harvest at Adams. She decided from the get-go that it would be fun to make a film about the program for the kick-off
assembly each year. Never mind that she had never even made a film before then.

The Adams film from 2008 is now featured on the national Web site. Some kids are drawn to the film-making portion of the program (others to the rumored pizza party), but in no time they’re discussing philanthropy.

“How many of you knew the word philanthropy before you did Penny Harvest?” I asked the lunchtime crew, who were all fifth-graders in their second year with the program. It was the only time that no one raised their hand.

The eight students I met during lunch are part of a group of 31 students, out of 45 applications this year. In response to why they applied, Quinn Smart volunteered that students are eager to join, “It started with 12 to 15 kids,” she said. “Now there are 31 who’ve gone onto leadership. It makes me happy.”

Caleb Backel-Corthell shook my hand when he introduced himself. “We all really wanted to do Penny Harvest,” he said. “I told myself I’m definitely going to try out for this. We all tried and succeeded.”

Hannah Stalter mentioned being aware of the program when it started at Adams. “We were a grade too young,” she said. “We didn’t know if we’d get to do it.”

Addressing what makes the program so fun, Mitzi Adler-Wachter talked about creating characters such as Dr. Big Brain and Dr. Know-it-all for the movie. Travis Spring said what he really likes is that students choose who to help, and they all get a part in the movie.

Melanie Greenberg particularly enjoys the research portion and then deciding where to donate the funds. “I feel like we have so much power,” she told me.

Natalie Budd sitting next to Melanie nodded in agreement. “Not only are you helping people, but then you get to go on to Philanthropy Roundtable.”

“Which is really cool,” Alexandra Mihalski chimed in. “Last year we donated to Childhaven.”

Quinn Smart added, “People in the community realize that kids can make a difference. It’s a great thing to do and it makes you feel good.”

There was a chorus of agreement around the circle of very engaged kids. Then we took my pennies to the brand new collection jug, and they poured them in for me.

My mother makes it a point to always pick up any pennies on the street, having decided that she should never feel she’s too good to pick up a penny. It’s possible that these fifth-graders, who will one day enter the world as high school class of 2017, will never pass by a penny either, even though they weren’t born during the Great Depression.

What I know from looking around at their eager faces is that all meetings should be so inspiring,
and they are going to make that Philanthropy Roundtable sizzle.

Pennies (as well as all other coins) can be dropped off through Thanksgiving break in the main office at Adams Elementary School, located at 6110 28th Ave. N.W.

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