Better Together Program Brings Middle School Students to Serve Seniors
By Robert Haugh

Teaming up with sixth graders in the Santa Clara Unified School District, Santa Clara City Firefighters took another step forward with their long-established Better Together program by delivering hundreds of hand-made Valentines to local retirement homes.

Sixth graders from the Fire Department-sponsored Better Together classes at Buchser, Cabrillo and Don Callejon Middle Schools created hundreds of Valentines cards. These were delivered on field trips to retirement homes, including The Westmont, Liberty Tower and John Burns Gardens as part of a new community service and outreach portion of the Better Together program.

Firefighters, who serve as mentors for the Better Together classes, believe that community service and outreach are important values to instill in their students.

"Better Together is about fostering leadership skills in our youth; and community outreach and service are a big part of good leadership," said Zach McGhie, Better Together Program Director. "By talking together about what we can do to reach out to our local community and then taking action, we hope to teach our students that they can make a difference, right now, as 11 and 12 year olds—by something even as simple as delivering their personalized Valentines."

The students were excited about connecting with people they may not normally have contact with, and learning how to begin conversations and introduce themselves to the folks they give their Valentines to. Dylan, a sixth grader from Buchser Middle School was looking forward to talking to a veteran, "who served our country."

The Better Together Program, celebrating its 25th anniversary, is supported and funded entirely by the Santa Clara City Firefighters Foundation, the non-profit arm of the Firefighters Local Union 1171.

The program provides leadership coaching and mentorship to selected SCUSD students. The yearlong program teams up two to three firefighters with a group of sixth grade students, once a week. School counselors and teachers select students for the program at the beginning of the year. Through a variety of activities, Better Together classes develop leadership skills, communication, self-esteem, teamwork and community outreach.

Started 25 years ago by firefighters with one class of 15 sixth graders at Buchser Middle School, the program was originally called Better Things and was more focused on mentoring "troubled teens." Over years, with Santa Clara Firefighters dedicating their personal time and mentorship skills, the program has developed into a positive leadership program, open to all sixth graders who demonstrate leadership potential. Classes have been held at all SCUSD middle schools.

Over 30 firefighters donate their time to the program as facilitators in classrooms. The Fire Department will be honoring the firefighters, retired and current, at an annual awards ceremony in July, which will highlight and celebrate the 25 years of the service of the Better Together program.

The Santa Clara City Firefighters Foundation pays for all the equipment and associated cost incurred by the program. There is no cost to the students, the schools or to Santa Clara Fire Department.

In May, Better Together classes will be participating in an annual Planet Granite rock climbing field trip, which assists students in facing fears, practicing trust and becoming more confident.

For more information visit http://bettertogetherca.com/ or www.iaff1171.org