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KINGSWOOD MONTESSORI SCHOOL

Kids learn farming's purpose for Ag Literacy Day

A Redland tree farmer read books to young students and urged them to keep the area's farming tradition alive as part of annual Ag Literacy Day.

By David Goodhue

dgoodhue@MiamiHerald.com

Talking about hemispheric free trade or encroaching development might not mean a whole lot to the youngsters at Kingswood Montessori.

But this, they comprehend: "Pretty soon, most of our squash, beans and tomatoes could come from Costa Rica, Mexico or wherever."

That was tree-farmer Stephanie Forthman speaking to about 20 first-, second- and third-graders at the Homestead school, at 20130 SW 304th St. on March 16. She was there for the third annual Ag Literacy Day, which is sponsored by the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services and is intended to pique youngsters' interest in farming, an important but declining industry in South Miami-Dade.

Forthman and her husband Hugh own Native Tree Nursery in the Redland.

"We're the last of the Mohicans in my opinion, and it's important for these children to know where their food comes from and how important agriculture is to the environment," she said.

Forthman, accompanied by her first-grade daughter Madison, read aloud from two children's books with farm themes chosen by the Agriculture Department.

Hundreds of farmers, ranchers and Future Farmers of America volunteers did the same at schools statewide. The readings will take place at other Miami-Dade schools in April, officials said.

Many Kingswood students come from farming families, and Kingswood Montessori headmaster David Calabrese said agriculture and horticulture have been built into the curriculum.

Teacher Patty Howarth said programs like Ag Literacy Day remind students in South Miami-Dade that their community is rooted in vegetable, fruit and tree farming.

"It's important. Every year we have a science fair with a focus, and our last one was agriculture-related," said Howarth, who's been teaching at Kingswood for 23 years.

This year's selection of books were both allegorical tales meant to impart the values of patience and efficient reuse of resources.

In *Til the Cows Come Home*, an adaptation of an old Jewish folk tale, author Jodi Icenogge tells the story of a cowboy who wore a pair of leather chaps "until the cows came home." The chaps become worn over time, so he makes a cowboy hat out of them, until it too becomes too worn to wear. He then finds other uses for the leather.

In *Pig and Crow*, written by Kay Charoa, a lonely pig who loves to bake is consistently fooled by a crow into giving up his baked goods for companionship.

But what the crow doesn't realize is that by delivering deceptive gifts -- such as "magic seeds" that turned into pumpkins; a "magic worm" that was actually a caterpillar that transforms into a butterfly; and a "magic egg" that becomes a goose -- he was actually teaching the pig that patience reaps rewards.

Forthman has been involved with the Ag Literacy Day for the last three years. She said she's concerned about the number of local farmers who are cashing out due to busy hurricane seasons, cheaper agricultural products overseas and the lure of developers' deep pockets.

She said now is as important a time as ever to get children interested in farming if the area's legacy is to continue.

And with the disappearing farm landscape and the growing sprawl of South Miami-Dade, she urged the children to "plant trees to create a new forest for the urban environment."

"It's important to keep on farming and get those trees planted," Forthman said.