

# History, Hands On

A trailblazing partnership brings Agua Caliente history and culture to local classrooms.

BY MIRANDA CAUDELL



**WHEN STUDENTS** hold a beautifully woven basket in their hands, hear the beat of a gourd rattle, or see a cluster of native palm trees swaying in the warm desert breeze, entire cultures come to life — and thanks to a partnership between the Palm Springs Unified School District (PSUSD), the nonprofit PSUSD Foundation, and the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, thousands of Coachella Valley students are being introduced to local Tribe like never before.

“It always struck me that Palm Springs had such a deep

and wonderful Indigenous presence because of the Agua Caliente Tribe,” says Foundation Board President Mark Gauthier, “but that the kids didn’t have any connection to it in schools because there was no Native studies program.”

That changed in 2017 when PSUSD and the Foundation presented the Agua Caliente Tribal Council with an idea for an elementary-level curricular unit on Native American studies. Once all three parties had agreed to the concept, the real work began: creating the content.

“The essence of education is to pass information from generation to generation,” Tribal Chairman Jeff L. Grubbe says. “To share our story with younger generations of our greater community in Palm Springs, Cathedral City, Rancho Mirage and Desert Hot Springs is one of the greatest gifts. Our partnership with the school district and foundation is essential in creating a hub to transmit knowledge of our cultural heritage as well as our past and present.”

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A team of curriculum writers led by PSUSD history teacher Russell Eves collaborated with Tribal leaders to produce a third-grade unit of study grounded in Agua Caliente life — past and present — that’s groundbreaking

in its very nature. Whereas most districts use materials included in textbooks (which are produced by “big publishing companies,” Eves explains), this curriculum delves into true history and heritage previously known only to Tribal members, all while meeting State of California educational standards.

“These lessons,” Eves says, “were designed to engage the students hands-on and bring them face to face with materials and artifacts.”

Approximately 1,800 third-grade students completed the pilot program during the 2019–2020 school year, and additional upper-level units of study are on the horizon; an eighth-grade curriculum launches in classrooms this fall, while an eleventh-grade component has reached the final editing stage.

“We believe it is a model for school districts across America who have substantial Indigenous cultures within their regions,” says Gauthier, noting that the curriculum is a semifinalist in the “Honoring Nations” award competition within the American Indian Economic Development program at Harvard University, recognizing exemplary tribal government programs and initiatives.

“It doesn’t happen very often where there is this co-creation and co-writing of material that tells a story, especially locally,” adds Ellen Goodman, the Foundation’s Director. For her, the effect the program will have on the students is the most rewarding part of all. “Our kids who are raised here get to be a part of that story now,” she continues. “They get to learn it and hear it and apply it. It will be life changing for them. 🍌