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Cornell staff, Geneva Head Start mark milestone in outreach effort

By Joe Ogradnick

Of the many diverse groups to visit the various facilities at Cornell's New York State Agricultural Experiment Station in Geneva, perhaps none has been welcomed at the facility as regularly as the Geneva Head Start. The group reached a milestone of sorts last fall with its 20th consecutive annual tour of station orchards and vineyards, where horticultural sciences professor Alan Lakso and his staff have been hosting the Head Start class since 1988.

Year after year, the three- and four-year-old children delight in the visit. Lakso talks to them about the apple and grape varieties before the children walk the grounds looking at trees and picking apples. The teachers usually depart with extra apples to use in classroom activities like making applesauce, counting seeds, and learning the parts of an apple.

"Their visit each year has become a real highlight for our lab and is one small way to help out the community," Lakso said.

Jane Gerling, director of Geneva Head Start, said that the annual trip to the station offers the children "the ideal learning experience." Students and teachers talk about the visit for weeks afterward, she said.

"They are totally surrounded by the sights and smells of the orchard and get to pick their own apples and talk about the colors, size and number of fruits," Gerling said. "The children remember this visit to the apple orchard long after they have left Head Start."

Teacher Lisa Krossber enjoys watching the children light up as they pick apples to bring home to their families. "We are very grateful to the staff at the Experiment Station for being so hospitable to us and for promoting a positive, real-life, hands-on learning experience for our students and their families," she added.

For 10 years, technicians Rick Piccioni and Michelle Rose have helped Lakso lead the tours, and visiting scientists from around the world often join the group. He appreciates the handmade thank-you cards from the kids every year, along with their enthusiasm for picking fruit.

"Alan Lakso's heartfelt initiative working with Head Start students is one prime example of what the station does to share our knowledge of science and agriculture," said station director Tom Burr. "This is a prime example of the many outreach projects where station members volunteer their time to make our community a better place."

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Alan Lakso talks about apples with Geneva Head Start students in one of the Experiment Station Orchards.

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