

## Santa returns to Verde Elementary in North Richmond



Santa passed out more than 300 gifts at Verde Elementary School. (Robert Rogers|RichmondConfidential)

## By: Robert Rogers | December 16, 2011 - 4:56 pm

For more than a decade, Santa Claus and his natural white beard regaled the children at Verde Elementary in North Richmond every December.

Santa Claus also went by the name Fred Jackson, a North Richmond icon and longtime activist.

Jackson died in September after a bout with cancer. He was 73.

But on Friday morning Santa Claus was back to visit with the children at Verde and provide gifts, just as Jackson would have wanted.

"Fred was a little bit weakened last year," remembered County Supervisor John Gioia, whose office amasses and distributes the donated gifts. "But he was still here for the kids."

## 2-2-2-2 Verde Toy & Coat



Gayle McLaughlin and John Gioia flank Santa as kids line up. (Robert Rogers|RichmondConfidential)

Gioia, along with a handful of volunteers and school administrators, passed out wrapped toys to more than 300 children at Verde Elementary School Friday. This year Santa was played by volunteer Kathleen Sullivan. She wore a faux white beard, but the kids were no less impressed.

Kindergarteners, each class at Verde filed into a multipurpose room, where they sang Christmas Carols and each got a few moments with, and a gift from, Santa Claus. When the fourth-graders came in, Gioia decided they were old enough to hear a little bit about the man who helped start this tradition 14 years ago.

One of the guests was Leo Jackson, Fred Jackson's younger brother.

"If Fred were here today, he would tell you to study hard, and that whatever you want to do you can do it," Jackson told the children. "My brother Fred, he loved education."

Lloyd Madden, a newspaper publisher and former student at Verde, also addressed the students.

"Whatever you dream can become a reality," Madden said. "You just have to have faith."

Friday's event was also a celebration of sorts for the renaissance of the school itself. In the late 1990s, Verde Elementary ranked as one of the state's lowest performing. Playground equipment was decayed and dangerous, and new leaks sprung with nearly every rain. The thendrab green school had the look of a dilapidated prison, remembered Keith Axtell, who headed a multi-agency task force that aimed to improve North Richmond in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

"The school was severely distressed, like the neighborhood was," Axtell said. "It looked nothing like it does today, it is vastly improved."

## 3-3-3-3 Verde Toy & Coat

Axtell was joined by several other former government officials who once worked in North Richmond. Richmond Mayor Gayle McLaughlin was also on hand to help pass out gifts. The southern-most slice of North Richmond is in the city of Richmond, and McLaughlin and Gioia have worked together to improve municipal services on both sides of the boundary.

For more than a month, Gioia and his staff appealed to residents for donations and collected toys and coats at his El Cerrito offices. Gioia's West County District includes the unincorporated community of North Richmond.

Gioia reminded a group of fourth graders that the largest street in the neighborhood was recently named for the man who donned the Santa suit last year.

"Remember him when you walk down 'Fred Jackson Way," Gioia said.