

U-Hill Elementary grade 1 class sets high bar with theatre production

By Murray and Jen McCutcheon

On Friday, Kate Foreman-Ng's grade 1 class at University Hill Elementary School performed an original theatre production, *Beavers – The Musical!* Written and choreographed by class parent and professional actor, Sara Holt, and Ms. Foreman-Ng, the 45-minute production was the focus of the class for much of the spring. Using theatrical performance, music, and dance, the show told a lively, upbeat tale about animals, nature, and conservation in Vancouver's Pacific Spirit Park.

Requiring months of preparation to memorize lines, choreograph moves for more than 20 children, and hand-make costumes, props and sets, the production was more befitting of a senior high school class than a group of seven-year olds. But that didn't phase Ms. Holt. "I wanted to give them the experience of building the show as an ensemble, working together doing a professional production," she remarked while celebrating with the cast and parents over a potluck dinner.

Ms. Holt highlighted the confidence instilled in the young actors as one of the many positive attributes of the experience. "There are so many life lessons they can learn through theatre. One of the things I encouraged was to follow their own path, their own journey on stage, but that we were all in it together, no matter the role."

The musical's plot about a squirrel home that is destroyed by a family of beavers constructing a new lodge was inspired by students' observations of trees cleared at UBC for the new Acadia Road development. In the play, urged on by their fellow forest dwellers, the beavers resolve to reuse their old lodge and not to cut down more trees.

The sustainability theme fit in well with the strong emphasis on outdoor education at U-Hill elementary. Through the efforts of Ms. Foreman-Ng and other committed teachers, and the close proximity of the school to UBC and Pacific Spirit Park, U-Hill elementary has become a leader in outdoor learning. The program includes partnerships with Metro Vancouver, the Pacific Spirit Park Society, and UBC professors studying topics such as outdoor education and biodiversity; as well as a year-round commitment by teachers to regularly conduct lessons out in the forest. Ms. Foreman-Ng's class spends hours in Pacific Spirit Park each week exploring and engaging in interdisciplinary learning in the spectacular natural setting of the park. Students have learned about the lifecycle of salmon in the local creeks, studied and compared leaf structures, and sketched their observations of a beaver habitat. Through experiences such as these, they are learning about the rich diversity of nature, and becoming mindful of the impact of humans on their environment.

The play was also testament to the tremendous value of the liberal arts in education. The students developed the capacity to memorize and deliver lines, exercised their creative faculties to help design the set and costumes, and honed their abilities to move expressively in

dance and song. Moreover, the dedication and cooperation required to successfully execute a production are qualities that will serve these young people well throughout their lives.