

Yosemite National Park marks 125th anniversary with youth gathering

By Carmen George

The first of several events was held at Yosemite National Park to celebrate its 125th anniversary as well as the 100th anniversary of the National Park Service in 2016. Read more [here](#). THEFRESNOBEE

YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK — Watching a group of young children press their palms against the rough bark of a massive ponderosa pine here Tuesday, a park ranger standing nearby said [Yosemite](#) is the “ultimate classroom.”

Some 300 children gathered near Yosemite Falls to help start the [park’s 125th anniversary celebration](#), which is themed, “Youth of Today: Park Stewards of Tomorrow.”

Preschoolers to college students, many from the park’s gateway communities, sat cross-legged together at the start of a path leading to the roaring waterfall and listened to testimonials about the power and beauty of a place beloved around the world.

“We’re in the midst of a three-year celebration,” Yosemite Superintendent Don Neubacher told the children. Last year, the park celebrated the 150th anniversary of the Yosemite Grant Act, which protected part of present-day Yosemite before the establishment of national parks. Next year, the park will celebrate 100 years of the National Park Service agency.

Neubacher said more than 40 events are planned for this year’s 125th anniversary.

Nine-year-old Gabriel Lavan-Ying of Florida helped Neubacher kick off this year’s festivities. Gabriel was made an honorary park ranger last year through the [Make-A-Wish Foundation](#).

Standing at about half Neubacher’s height and wearing a mini park ranger outfit on Tuesday, Gabriel was also made honorary chairman of the park’s 125th anniversary.

Gabriel really likes being a ranger.

“It is fun because they (park rangers) do amazing things like put out fires, rescue people and they are just really awesome. And I like their uniform.”

Neubacher told Gabriel he heard the 9-year-old wants Yosemite’s top job.

“Yes, but it is going to be hard because you are very awesome at doing your job,” Gabriel told Neubacher. “And, you still have a couple more years.”

Another speaker, Vera Reyes, 22, who grew up in the central San Joaquin Valley, talked about spending 40 days in Yosemite’s backcountry during a trip led by [Adventure Risk Challenge](#).

“I knew the sweat of a farm laborer and could identify every crop that was growing as the seasons change,” she said, “but I never knew the sweat that comes down your face when you have hiked in vast wilderness and you are happy.”

Reyes now works for the park through the [University of California at Merced’s Yosemite Leadership Program](#).

Another UC Merced student and Adventure Risk Challenge alumna, Naly Thao, talked about the “wisdom” of Yosemite. “It offers a home when your home doesn’t really feel like home.”

By noon, students split into small groups to create art and learn about wildlife, water and not littering.

John Adkins, 11, of Sacramento — addressing future park visitors — said Yosemite is a relaxing, peaceful “good place — don’t ruin it for others.”

Neubacher noted that while Yosemite is protected as a national park, climate change and other outside influences continue to threaten it. “Conservation battles have to stay at the forefront.”

To help foster the next generation of stewards, Shauna Potocky, director of education and youth programs for the park, said one school from each of the park’s nearby communities was adopted into the “[A Class Act](#)” program last year. The program follows four classes of youngsters over three years, providing yearly Yosemite field trips, special classes and presentations.

Potocky said places like Yosemite give children the chance to disconnect from technology and society’s fast pace so they can look within.

“When you give people the space and the time to slow down, it really becomes evident to them who they are as a real person and how they can make a difference for places like this,” she said. “And the solutions that they find in their hearts are oftentimes the same solutions that can make a difference in their own communities.”

Kathleen Murphy, principal of Oakhurst Elementary School, said the Yosemite trips are helping her students become “environmental ambassadors.”

“It’s inspiring because I love this park. ... Europe has all the cathedrals and our country has the national parks.”

Lasen Andrews, a 12-year-old who attends school in the Yosemite community of Wawona, read a letter addressed to children of the future about what Yosemite means to him.

“Yosemite is life — the deer, the squirrels with bushy tails, the coyotes, the birds and the bears. It’s the trees like the pines, the oaks, the cedars and especially the giant sequoias.”

He said Yosemite is also beauty, history and “fun times” — swimming in rivers, hiking up trails, marveling at rainbows dancing in the mist of Vernal Fall, skiing and drinking hot cocoa by a campfire.

“But most importantly, it’s a memory. It’s a memory that will last you a lifetime. These are all the things you should look forward to when you visit Yosemite and I hope you have lots of fun. Sincerely, Lasen.”

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