

Kids trade pigs for grown-up banking

By Susan Gordanier
The Argus

The scene could have come from the 1950s.

Small children, each carrying a colorful piggy bank, Thursday overwhelmed the lobby of the Wells Fargo bank branch at Southeast 10th Avenue and East Main Street.

The 13 children had already paraded up Southeast 12th Avenue, then west on Main Street before pouring through the bank's doors.

Fortunately the bank's staff were expecting their small visitors. Branch Manager Bob Rollinger herded the new customers down a hallway where they divided up into smaller groups for some personal banking attention from Wells Fargo staff.

"Do you want the man banker or the lady banker," he asked five girls, obviously friends, who had banded together. "The lady banker," the girls shouted back, taking seats around the desk of bank representative Jessica Ronan. Ronan then helped each girl trade the contents of her piggy bank for a brand new Wells Fargo savings account.

Each of these children had recently completed a financial education program sponsored by Bienestar, the nonprofit housing and services provider that operates the apartments where they live.

As Karen Shawcross, Bienestar's executive director explained, the nonprofit helps provide affordable housing to Washington County residents. It maintains 458 rental units in 10 separate properties within the county: three in Hillsboro, at the Montebello, Sierra West and Sunset Gardens on 12th and 13th avenues, and others in Aloha, Reedville, Cornelius, Forest Grove and Scappoose.

Seven of the 10 properties can rent only to families of farmworkers. One of Bienestar's goals at its 1991 founding was to improve conditions for those in migrant labor camps. Over the years, the mission has expanded to give families tools to eventually move out of subsidized housing and become more self-sufficient.

These tools, Shawcross said, include providing on-site GED preparation classes, computer literacy classes and English as a second language training.

Afterschool programs for children include basketball, art, music and nature classes, summer reading programs and the Financial Fitness for Life program just completed by the children who visited Wells Fargo on Thursday.

During the five-week long Financial Fitness program the children learned money management skills that would serve them into adulthood. At the course's completion, each child with a perfect attendance record received a piggy bank containing \$8, with which they



Susan Gordanier / The Argus

Shirley Ortega, Leslie Martinez, Sarella Mora, Ilyne Ortega and Dulce Casarez (left to right) wait patiently Thursday with their piggy banks. The girls successfully completed Bienestar's Financial Fitness for Life class and came to open savings accounts at Wells Fargo Bank.

could open a savings account in their own names.

Wells Fargo helped sponsor the program. Rollinger said Wells Fargo has always set aside money for community investment, and within that budget their top priority is education. He said they gave a grant to Bienestar for this Hands-on Banking program. "This is our big teach-kids-to-save program," he said.

Supporting childhood financial literacy makes good business sense too. As Rollinger said, "These are the kids who someday will need car loans," and other banking services.