

## WELCOME GRANGERS

Walter Boomsma



# THE GRANGE

BY DONNA HALVORSEN

## Still the Community Centers of Small Towns

**W**alter and Janice Boomsma were driving home to New Jersey after a Maine vacation when they looked at each other and said, almost in unison, “We belong here.”

“It was as if our hearts had already moved to Maine – we just needed to get everything else relocated,” he recalls.

They knew enough about Maine and themselves that they saw no need to wait until they retired. They would just pack up and move, and they did, in 2001.

The couple wanted to be involved in their new Maine community. They wanted to do something together, and they liked the Grange’s family orientation and agricultural stewardship. They heard about the Grange from a woman working at a local store who invited them to a meeting. One meeting was all it took; the Grange felt just right.

Each Grange can choose its own projects, reflecting local needs and interests. That’s how the Valley Grange, whose area stretches from Monson to Milo, came to focus so



strongly on children. And how Boomsma — who talks with his hands and quotes Socrates — built a life around it.

The Boomsmas found a sense of belonging in the Valley Grange, and Boomsma found his passion in working with kids — the hundreds of rural Maine children who have embraced him as “Mr. Boomsma.”

“My passion is kids first, second and third,” he says. “I believe it is easier to build strong children than to fix broken adults.” People in rural areas have known about the Grange for a long time. It’s the oldest farmers’ advocacy group in the country. Boomsma is happy that the Grange has expanded its vision to include rural life in general, with a grassroots approach that allows local or community Granges to adopt causes and projects based on the members’ interests.

The Valley Grange’s signature project is giving dictionaries to all third graders in four schools in Piscataquis County, more than 1,200 books so far. In an era of smart phones, iPads, Facebook and Twitter, the dictionary may seem as old-fashioned as the Grange itself. But to these rural Maine kids, it’s a treasure.

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“The visit to the grange was fun because we got the dictionary,” one wrote. “I always wanted a dictionary. My brother and sister have one. They will not let me use it.”

“I found China in the dictionary,” said another.

“We will use them wisely like for writing time when Mrs. Patten says that we have to spell a word correctly,” said yet another. “I love the dictionary because we can look up new words or how many presidents there are and what their names are.”

One girl was using her dictionary to teach her brother to read. Another said her father was building her a bookcase because she now has a book.

“This is a project with lasting results,” Boomsma says. “The dictionary is theirs. It gives them power. It gives them that sense of independence.”

The Valley Grange has created other children’s programs, including the Bookworm Program. “We had fun giving out dictionaries, but that’s only once a year, and we wanted more,” Boomsma explains.



After Elementary Principal Julie Orton suggested a one-on-one reading activity, they came up with the idea of having children read to adult volunteers. “When kids pick what to read, they feel independence and control,” Boomsma says. “Plus it builds our relationship with them as they try to pick things the ‘bookworms’ will enjoy.”

Boomsma was listening to a second grader read when the girl was stumped by the word “simultaneously.” “I’ll never get that word,” she said, but they worked on it until she got it, and she also learned its meaning. In school, a year later, she brought a friend to see him, telling the friend, “Okay, tell him.” The friend carefully spelled the word, and the girl beamed, “I taught her that!”

Boomsma wasn’t retired when he came to Maine 13 years ago, and he’s still working. A licensed real estate broker, he teaches real estate courses, as well as adult education classes. He trains substitute teachers and became one himself in the Piscataquis Community Elementary School. He’s 67. Janice is 64. They live in Abbot and have two daughters and five grandchildren.



Janice is active in the Grange, especially in fundraising. She teaches in the dental program at the University of Maine in Augusta and works with an in-school dental clinic called Smiles for Life, so they often swap kid stories when the day is done.

Boomsma's volunteer and teaching experiences have given him dozens of stories about kids, such as the one about the second grader who stayed behind after the other kids went outside for recess. She was reading a joke book, and she had a joke for Mr. Boomsma: "Knock, knock," she said. "Who's there?" Boomsma asked. "Lena," she said. "Lena who?" he asks. "Lean a little closer and I'll kiss you," she said. She was mortified when she realized what she had said to her teacher and adult friend.

"It's one of those stories that you couldn't make up," he says. "You just have to be open to these fun experiences with the kids."

Boomsma credits the kids with being great teachers. One day a second grader was exasperated with him for some reason. She put her hands on the side of her head to imitate horse blinders and said, "Mr. Boomsma, you need to focus." (Her instruction became a joke among local Grangers, who remind him of it when he gets excited about a new project.)

In the GrowME agricultural program, second graders make butter. They put the ingredients into a jar, each child gets to shake it 10 times, then it's spread on crackers for them to taste. It's a sensory experience: What does it smell like? What does it look like? How is it different from the butter you buy in the store? One of the kids took the recipe home and made butter with her family. She brought the newly-made butter to school and said, "Now we have a family tradition."

People kept telling Boomsma he had to write a book, so he did. He self-published "Small People – Big Brains: Stories about Simplicity, Exploration and Wonder", at Abbot Valley




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*People kept telling* Boomsma he had to write a book, *so he did:* titled *Small People—Big Brains*.

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Press, which he founded. (He admits he's thinking about a sequel, perhaps titled "Small People – Big Hearts" "since many kids have demonstrated huge capacities to care.")

His adult responsibilities include serving as the Maine State Grange's communications director. Both his work and conversation often are punctuated with funny and inspirational quotations, such as: "Adults are just obsolete children." And from Dr. Seuss: "Today is gone. Today was fun. Tomorrow is another one."

While Boomsma loves talking about the initiatives Valley

Grange has started on behalf of kids, he won't listen long to anyone who talks about "programs" as a way of helping kids or as a solution to society's problems.

"Our kids don't really need programs; we have programs coming out of our ears," Boomsma says. "They just need a person who will listen, show interest and compliment them and their work when they deserve it; someone who will respect them and make them feel important. The programs I like are nothing more than an excuse to do that."

One of Boomsma's favorite sayings is that "if you want people to build a ship, you don't get boards and teach them shipbuilding. You get them to yearn for the sea."

"The kids are hungry for adult interest," he says. "All kids crave recognition and support, two things that are very easy to offer. All you have to do is ask them questions and listen to their answers. There are only winners when you spend quality time with kids."

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