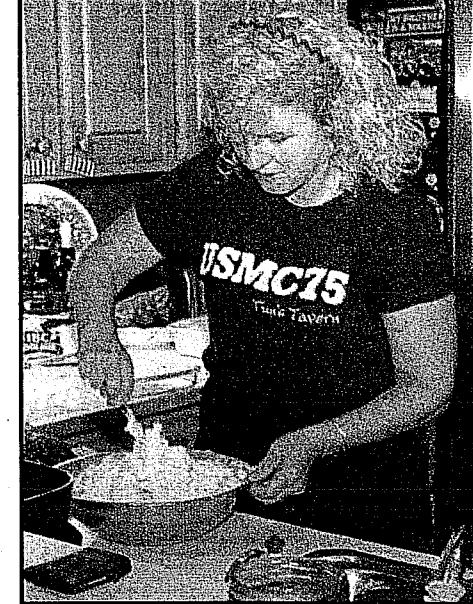


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THE BREAKFAST CLUB



Neighborhood students, top left, gather in the kitchen for eggs, pancakes and other breakfast foods. Karen Witters, top right, whips up pancake batter. Lakeridge Middle School Principal Steve Fulkerson, bottom, talks to the students before their breakfast.

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Photos by Dannie Oliveaux

Casual gathering offers food, fun, perspective during school's late start

BY DANIEL NASH
The Courier-Herald

Approximately 20 kids clustered in the driveway of the lake house, hidden behind the trees. Shouting and running, one was nearly indistinguishable from the other in the sea of youth. But on closer examination there was, in fact, some semblance of a line. From the front, one basketball sailed upward toward a hoop – it missed – then another, which found its mark.

"You're out," several shouted. "You're out!"

Sadee, the house dog, paced excitedly on the porch, watching the visitors and trying to figure out how she could get into the fun. Lakeridge Middle School Principal Steve Fulkerson watched as well, with a piece of paper in his hand and a wide smile on his face. He was briefly reviewing the speech he would be giving the basketball players in an hour, but he took a moment to identify the game as "bump," something his sons, now grown, spent hours playing in his own driveway.

Fulkerson and all but one of the 21 children were guests in the home of Karen Witters, mother of Lakeridge middle school student Gabe. All were gathered at her Bonney Lake home for breakfast, fun and even some stealth education before the school day.

From 6 to 8:45 a.m. each Wednesday, Witters hosts a breakfast and meet-up for area students, an event known informally as the Breakfast Club. The club began in 2008, when the Sumner School

District announced once-a-week 9 a.m. late starts.

On a recent Wednesday, sausage patties and links were finished, but the baked goods were just beginning to come out of the oven. Pancakes had just taken their spot on the stove and eggs hadn't been started, lest they be served cold.

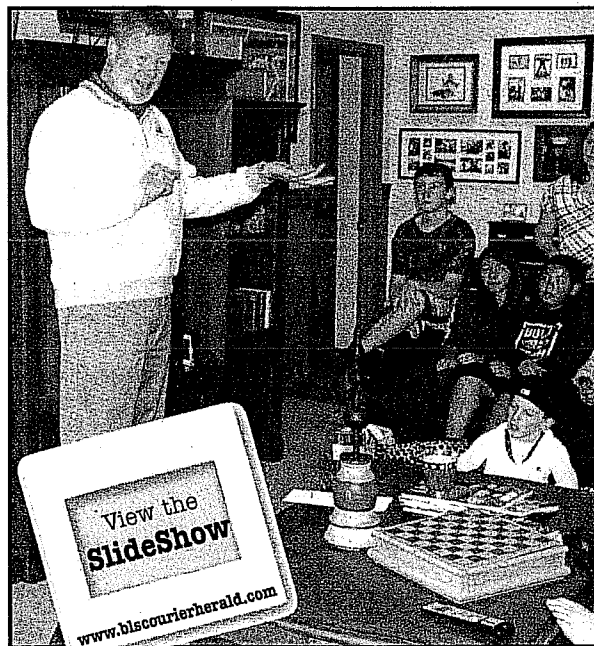
Marina Peck, a student who likes to help out in the kitchen, watched and flipped a batch of blueberry pancakes.

"Pancakes are probably my favorite, because you can add anything to them and they'll still taste good," she said.

Witters popped a batch of miniature cupcakes out of their pan. A moment later she passed them to Marina on a carefully organized tray. Another mother took over the pancakes as Marina walked out front to see if anyone wanted a small snack. A few kids took one from the tray, but most were too absorbed in the current round of bump. Sadee stared at the out-of-reach treats with her tongue hanging out.

An arriving mother, Tara Weed, passed in the opposite direction, heading into the house after dropping some cans into a box by the welcome mat. Every week or so, Gabe and his friends take the box to the Bonney Lake Food Bank.

Fulkerson went back into the kitchen. It was mostly adults in the kitchen now, with a few scattered kids. Three girls stared out the window at the backyard, on the shore of Lake Debra Jane. A younger



Club

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boy cradled Romeo, one of Witters' cats.

With coffee brewed, adults enjoyed a few moments of small talk. Witters discussed the Seahawks with Fulkerson.

Some late arrivals came in. Mary Bahr arrived with her sixth-grader, Jason, and seventh-grader, Ashley, both attending for the first time.

"It's so nice to meet the two of you," Witters said.

Then the brother and sister scurried off, Ashley to the driveway and Jason to the living room.

Bahr owns her own housecleaning company and works an earlier shift every other Wednesday. She normally gets ready and leaves for work after the kids have already left for school, but late start forces her to prepare all of them simultaneously.

"This way I don't have to leave home early, I know they're safe and that they're going to get to school on time," she said.

The counter was close to reaching its safe limit of dishes, but the eggs were



To view or buy photos got to www.blscourierherald.com Photo by Darinie Oliveaux

Barbara Shulz and Marina Peck prepare scrambled eggs and pancakes in Karen Witters' kitchen for a group of more than 20 children.

only halfway scrambled and Marina had posted herself back at the stove to finish pancakes. The rest of the volunteers were busy "de-swine flu-ing" the area.

It was time. Witters stepped outside and stuck her fingers in her mouth to let out an ear-piercing whistle.

"Hey everyone, it's time," she said to the basketball players. "Shoes off, and come into the kitchen. We're going to listen to a guest speaker and have some breakfast."

Everyone swarmed inside. Sadee tried to use the opportunity to sneak into the door, but came just short of a closing door.

No one tried to make an early grab for food. The living room filled to capacity as each student jockeyed for a spot to listen to the weekly guest speaker.

Gabe Witters stood up and welcomed everyone to the club before introducing Fulkerson.

The principal made his way to the front with his notes.

"I'm so glad to be here," he said. "You get so busy with the school business and that makes it hard to focus on what's really

important, which is having breakfast with you guys in the morning."

Fulkerson spoke about his personal interests, family and professional lives. He emphasized that by maintaining all three and keeping them somewhat separate, life, like a three-legged stool, would remain stable.

He also emphasized the importance of remaining positive. As an example, he brought out the children's story "Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good Very Bad Day," about a boy who wants to escape his troubles by going to Australia.

"The moral is, when you have a bad day, don't go to Australia," Fulkerson said. "Go to Lakeridge."

Then Witters and her volunteers directed the children into a line for

breakfast, ladies first, so everyone could hurry and get to school. After fun and speeches, there were only 15 minutes left to eat.

But the point of breakfast club isn't so much the meal as it is the community, Witters said. She took a moment to step away from the chaos to the front room of the house and look at the 21 pairs of shoes scattered on the floor.

"This is the best part of the whole thing, I think," she said. "I love seeing these shoes around my door. It reminds me of all the people that are gathered and happy in my home."

The Breakfast Club is open to all sixth- to 12th-grade students and parents in the Bonney Lake area.

For more information, contact Witters at 253-863-2506 or karick@nventure.com.