

SEE INSIDER COUPONS INSIDE

BASEBALL



Chanhassen blasts past Northfield in state tournament 1B

Northfield News

Newsstand \$1.25

www.northfieldnews.com

Wednesday, August 29, 2018

Back to school: district honors teachers as academic year kicks off

By ANNE KOPAS
akopas@northfieldnews.com

It's back-to-school season in Northfield. All Northfield students return to school Tuesday, Sept. 4. Parents can expect a few new things this year.

The high school schedule changed for the first time since 1981. Last spring, the school piloted a "flex hour" program, which shortened class periods from 50 to 47 minutes and passing times from 5 to 4 minutes to make room for an hour-long open period where students can eat lunch, seek academic help, work on homework or simply relax.

Both the high school and middle school have installed new classroom door locks that allow teachers to secure a classroom from the inside, saving precious time in case of an intruder situation. The high school will also get a secure entryway in December.

An update to the middle school parking lot added 47 new spots, shortening the long walk to the doors.

For the first time, Sibley, Bridgewater and Greenvale teachers will begin this fall with a new literacy curriculum that is standardized across all three schools. Organizers hope the curriculum will increase the number of students reaching grade-level reading proficiency by grade three.

At a kick-off event Monday morning, Northfield Public School District Superintendent Matt Hillmann addressed teachers and staff from all district schools, establishing goals for the coming school year and honoring longtime teachers for their years of service.

See TEACHERS on 2A



Northfield teachers and staff filled the middle school auditorium Monday morning for Superintendent Matt Hillmann's annual back-to-school presentation. (Anne Kopas/Northfield News)



Melinda McKeel (then Melinda Opitz), daughter of Bruce and Mary Ann Opitz, grew up in Pennsylvania with her sisters Jane and Nancy. She started taking piano lessons as a young child.

LIFE WELL LIVED



Melinda McKeel was known by both family members and students for her caring, accepting demeanor and desire to spread the love of music. (Photos courtesy of James McKeel)

PLAY ME A SONG

Melinda McKeel left legacy of music, acceptance, joy in hundreds of students

By ANNE KOPAS
akopas@northfieldnews.com

Melinda McKeel spent much of her 64-year life at a piano.

From the moment she started learning to play as a young girl growing up in Pennsylvania to her unexpected death Aug. 8, music was McKeel's life — that, and the people she influenced through it. During four decades of teaching piano, she taught 50 students a year and always had a waiting list, despite never advertising.

According to McKeel's husband of 42 years, James McKeel, it was her genuine love for her students, and a desire to cultivate a love of music in them, that drew people to her.

"I know lots of nice people," said James. "But she was way beyond that."

As a music education major at Westminster College in Pennsylvania, she was paired to perform with James, a vocal major. Romance blossomed, and the couple married right after their graduation in 1976.

"I was obsessed with her every one of those years," said James, now a music professor specializing in voice and lyric theater at St. Olaf College.

After a 3-month stint in Santa Fe that James described as an extended honeymoon while he completed an opera apprenticeship, the couple moved to Minnesota when he took a job with the Minnesota Opera. Melinda took a job as a middle school band director — and lasted only a year.

James said the middle school boys took a liking to her, calling her "Wonder Woman," but the large group setting didn't suit her. In starting up her own private practice, first in St. Paul and later in Northfield, she found an opportunity to teach music while connecting one-on-one with students.

But these lessons went above

teaching young musicians to be competent piano players. The letters James and family have received from former students since her death, describing the impact of McKeel's listening ear and unconditional acceptance, are a testament to the care she showed for each individual who sat in her basement studio.

Former student Derek Remeš wrote to the McKeel family after Melinda's death, sharing memories of

how her compassion influenced him long after his lessons ended.

"These memories are for me blossoms that never lose their fragrance, for I tend and water them every time I treat my own students with the same loving care with which Melinda nurtured me," wrote Remeš, now a professional musician and teacher, in a letter shared by the family.

Melinda took the time to listen to students' concerns about school and rough patches in their lives, often seeing kids grow into adults as she taught them over years of lessons.

"A different type of teacher might have said, 'Let's stick to the program.' But they shared everything with her," said James.

To make students feel as welcome as possible, the McKeels took great care to decorate the piano studio in ever-changing themes that included Disney's "Moana," "Star Wars" and "Frozen." They were in the midst of creating a "Harry Potter" theme when she died.

"She knew they were human beings and had inspirations," James said of his students.

This also drove Melinda to discard

the strict repertoires of classical music followed by some piano teachers. Instead, she encouraged students to follow their musical interests: showtunes, film scores, jazz, even Radiohead in one instance — anything to inspire a love of music.

As for her personal tastes, Melinda gravitated toward romantic composers like Chopin and Brahms, but piano wasn't her only love. Her husband described her as a "homebody," but also recounted family trips to places like Montana, Florida and Lake Superior.

For their 40th wedding anniversary, the couple took their adult children, Juliana Frizzell and Tyler McKeel, on a trip to Disney World that "broke the budget," said James.

When not traveling, Melinda was an active member of the Northfield United Methodist Church. She enjoyed reading in her hammock and was "relentless" at word games. After a full afternoon and evening of teaching, which sometimes until nearly 10 p.m., she would take a walk or drive with James, and they would swap stories about their students.

See MCKEEL on 2A

Northfield Women's Center gets new location after major donation from Northfield couple

By PHILIP WEYHE
pweyhe@northfieldnews.com

After long careers and some good business decisions, Barbara and LaVern Rippley have enough money to retire with plenty to spare. And they intend on sharing it wisely.

The couple's latest offering is to Northfield Women's Center, an eight-year-old organization that provides services to women, especially pregnant women and new moms.

The nonprofit, which previously leased a space on Division Street, needed to find a new home it could own and set itself up for the future.

The purchase price of the new space at 314 Washington St., which the Women's Center is now occupying, was \$265,000. The Rippleys contributed \$200,000 of that; the donation came with an unofficial condition.

"I said I'd donate to the building if you can promise not to use it for debt repayment," LaVern said. "You should not say, 'We have this much equity, so we should go out and do whatever we would.'

The Rippleys wanted their donation to be used as an investment in the future of the business; they wanted it to go directly to the build-

ing and not to the organization's fund balance. Executive Director Liz Blanchard said that's exactly what happened.

"Our intention of being in a building we own was to add longevity to our organization," she said.

Women's Center

Blanchard started Northfield Women's Center in 2010, then called Crisis Pregnancy Center. She worked as a nurse and counselor for many years and saw a need in the community.

She was responding to the "moment of fear" that she saw from

many young women and couples when encountering an unplanned pregnancy. With a medical background, she knew what services might be helpful and had connections to bring them in.

The center started out offering free, confidential pregnancy tests, peer counseling, and baby and maternity clothing to prospective parents. Soon after, staff developed a comprehensive prenatal health and parenting education program, a mentoring system and ultrasound services.

See DONATION on 2A

LaVern and Barbara Rippley Building
314 Washington



Barbara Jean and LaVern Rippley donated to the Northfield Women's Center, helping the organization to purchase a new space on Washington Street. (Photo courtesy of Northfield Women's Center)

Vol. 142, No. 34 ©2018

CALL US

Main: 507-645-5615
News: 507-645-1115
Sports: 507-645-1106
Circulation: 507-645-1107

COMING UP

Football starts season Friday at home vs. Mankato East.

MOBILE

Southern Minn Media Mobile App: iPhone and Android versions now available for download

DEATHS

Ayers, Susan
Dahlin, Richard
Duban, Thomas
Frankie, Rita

Otte, Patricia
Tietz, Duanne
Wolf, David

INDEX

CALENDAR 5A // LOCAL 2A-3A, 5A, 8A, 10A // OPINION 4A // OBITUARIES 6A-7A // SCENE 9A // SPORTS 1B-2B // NEIGHBORS 11A // CLASSIFIEDS 3B-4B

Good Luck Raiders!

Brian Trebelhorn Realtor • 507-254-7958
Chris Trebelhorn Assistant • 952-221-3579
TOLL FREE: 866-788-4795
www.briantrebelhorn.com
For all things Real Estate...and more!

RE/MAX®
ADVANTAGE PLUS

Relax...it's Remax!

Search for active listings



