



**OUR
SCHOOLS
COMMENTARY**

Eileen FitzGerald

Learning through Katrina

Ridgefield educator uses the hurricane in her lesson plan

Lynnda Wilson left her New Orleans home with her dog the day before Hurricane Katrina hit the gulf coast Aug. 29, 2005.

She put out lots of food for her two cats. Then, she stayed in her car, with friends in Baton Rouge and then with a family for months after the storm raged through the region, killing 1,600 and leaving 1 million homeless.

Wilson was working as an administrator and teacher at the University of Phoenix in New Orleans and had just completed her doctorate at the time of the storm.

She was asked to open a campus of the university in Norwalk six months after the storm, so she moved to Connecticut.

Now, the 46-year-old educator lives in Ridgefield with her dog and two cats and responds to her students' curiosity about the hurricane with classroom lessons, though analysis of the government's response must wait for another time.

"The students were so curious. They asked 'Why did people decide to leave? Why did others stay?'" Wilson said Friday.

"Since we are so close to New York and many lived through 9/11, they were curious," she said. "We had great discussions. It's like an onion when you peel back the layers."

Some people didn't have money to leave, she said.

The class discusses the significance of the date the hurricane hit, Aug. 29, just before the first of the month when many government checks arrive, and the expense to relocate, even temporarily.

She points out that threats of storms in the past were unfulfilled so some people chose to stay or wait until the last minute. And she describes the anguish of what she and others with pets went through to find a place to stay that would accept animals.

The students also want to talk about ethical issues, like who is saved first from the roof of a flooded house, the children or the elderly, and if a society breaks down completely, how is it built up again?

The native of Shreveport, La., said it's sad that so many lives were lost or changed by the hurricane, and that so much still has not been done.

"I think it will take 20 years to rebuild New Orleans," she said.

Wilson said she's grateful for her new home and for not having to worry about rebuilding with the risk of losing it again.

She doesn't dwell on the anniversary except the day has special meaning since it's the birthday of her late father.

"From tragedy there are always things to be learned," Wilson said. "Life goes on. It's important to learn from it and go on and share the experience so others can learn from it too."

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ENJOYING UKRAINE



Taras Slevinsky, left, of Stratford, and Olga Pendakiwsky, right, of Shelton, cook varenky at the Ukrainian Festival in Newtown on Sunday. Photography by Lisa Weir



Hundreds attend Ukrainian festival in Newtown

By John Pirro
STAFF WRITER

NEWTOWN — It was Olga Paproski's final wish, and on Sunday it came true.

For more than 30 years, the Paproski Christmas Tree Farm has been the site of the annual Ukrainian festival, and before her death in May at the age of 89, Paproski expressed her wish for at least one more.

So even though she wasn't there to savor the food, listen to the music and see the children enjoy the pony rides and petting zoo, Paproski was present in spirit.

"It is a little different this year," admitted Roma Hayda, a member of the Blessed Virgin Mary Ukrainian Catholic Church in Bridgeport, which sponsors the annual event. "But

Olga wouldn't be the person to dwell on sadness."

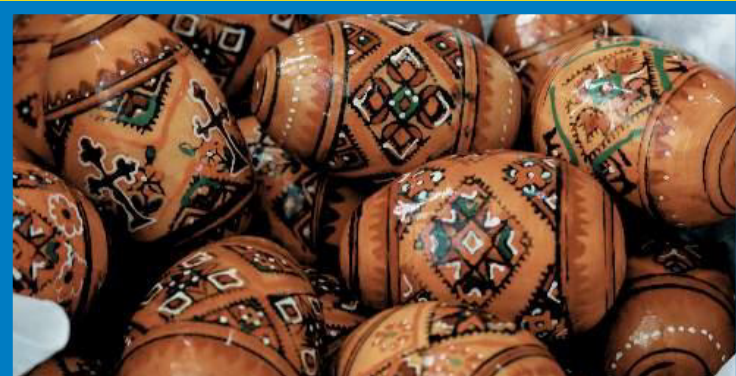
After a moment of silence to honor the memories of Paproski and her husband, Samuel, who 33 years ago opened their Hattertown Road property to the festival, the celebration was in full swing.

"It was just a church picnic and we started off with cars parking on the side of the road," said Stephen Paproski. On Sunday, the field next to the house where Paproski and his sister, Gloria Horbaty, grew up, was lined with cars and hundreds of people filled the yard, feasting on dishes such as pyrohi (dumplings), holubchi (stuffed cabbage) and kovbasa (sausage), listening to music and watching the dancers.

"We just wanted the people to enjoy themselves and the



Fred King of Seymour, is fed by his wife, Erin, while he holds their 5-month-old twin girls Cameron, left, and Kelsey at the Ukrainian Festival.



Ukrainian Easter eggs were on display and for sale.

children to have fun," Paproski said.

"When I was young, my parents used to take me to these kind of events," said Patricia Rayner of Brookfield, who came with her husband, John, and mother-in-law, Florence Rayner of Danbury.

"It's a nice way to revisit my youth, and see the customs and the dancing, and the food is delicious," Patricia Rayner added.

This year's festival also coincided with the 17th anniversary of Ukraine's independence from

the former Soviet Union, noted the Rev. Ivan Kaszczak, pastor of the church.

The future of the festival may be up in the air, Kaszczak said, depending on what happens to the property, but the emphasis on Sunday was a celebration.

"I think it's good we can come together and share," Hayda said. "We can enjoy something other than what we do every other day."

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Ridgefield schools set to open with a few new looks

By Susan Tuz
STAFF WRITER

RIDGEFIELD — Tighter security, new teachers and enhanced programs will greet students when they return to school.

For grades kindergarten through nine, the first day of school is Tuesday.

Grades 10 through 12 will start Wednesday.

Freshmen will start a day earlier than the rest of the students at Ridgefield High so they can get a chance to acclimate to the school.

"Freshmen spend the day in cluster groups, in abbreviated class periods and getting to know the physical layout of the building," Ridgefield High Principal Jeffrey Jaslow said.

"Members of our Student Union and Student Government generously give up their last day of summer vacation to help ensure that our ninth-graders' first day of high school is a good one," he said.

All Ridgefield schools now have security cameras and door buzzers that were installed over the summer.

All doors will be locked, and visitors buzzing at the front doors will be observed by office staff and asked a series of questions before being admitted.

At a glance

RIDGEFIELD SCHOOLS START: Tuesday for grades K through 9; Wednesday for grades 10 through 12
NEW TEACHERS: 35 throughout school system; new special education director, Karen Berasi
SECURITY: Cameras and buzz-in door locks at all schools

said Jason McKinnon, principal at Branchville Elementary School. "We now have a secure building, which is important to assure the safety of our most valuable asset — our students

"We see this as a way of enhancing and improving our security," said Deborah Low, the town's superintendent of schools.

"While this will be a slight inconvenience for people to have to be buzzed in, it will serve as an important deterrent and protection," she said.

"We're very pleased with the system,"

and our staff." Teaching staff has been increased at all schools.

There are 35 new teachers, who will be teaching throughout the town's six elementary, two middle schools and the high school. Four more teachers and the number of math-paraprofessionals has been increased in elementary school classes. There is also a new director of special education, Karen Berasi.

At the elementary level, the recess and lunch periods will be changed. Students will now go to recess before lunch rather than after. This will improve instruction following lunch as the students return to class calmer after lunch than they do when returning