



# Douglas County Post-Gazette

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## 6A: Badgers defeat SkyHawks in battle of unbeatens

# Cheers to 60 years

## Elkhorn Westridge Elementary celebrates six-decade anniversary with community

By Lance Lawton

Douglas County Post-Gazette

ELKHORN — After years of shaping children's lives through educational opportunities, Elkhorn's oldest elementary school celebrated its 60th anniversary last week.

On Sept. 17, students and their families gathered at Westridge Elementary School for a hot dog dinner, some cookies and a fun party with staff and members of the Parent Teacher Organization. Students were treated to snacks, sunglasses, bracelets, history lessons (through old yearbooks and photos) and even a book fair within the school's gym.

Westridge, located at 3100 N. 206th Street, opened its doors to students for the 1961-1962 school year when it was first known as Elkhorn Elementary School. The school began its journey with 240 children from kindergarten to sixth grade. June Egbert served as the school's first principal while Charles Duda acted as Elkhorn's superintendent. There were a total of 10 teachers on staff.

Murray McArdle, who previously attended Elkhorn Elementary, started second grade when Elkhorn's first elementary building opened in 1961.

With the celebration of its 60th anniversary, he said it's almost unbelievable how quickly time has passed.

"I've been out of school for 50 years now," McArdle said. "It's just hard to believe it's been 60 years since the school has been there, but time just goes by so fast. The elementary school was really the first big step in growth for Elkhorn Public Schools. I was in kindergarten when there was one building with all 13 grades in it. Building the grade school was huge for the future of Elkhorn and it was quite an expansion, but it was great for the district."

Another former student, Kathy Burney, started her journey through school as a kindergartener in 1975. After her family moved to Elkhorn in 1971, she and her three older sisters all attended Elkhorn Elementary/Westridge. After growing up and graduating, Burney ended up becoming a teacher at Westridge in 2002, teaching physical education.

While she remembers her PE classes taking place in "the pit" (the basement of what the District Administration building is now), Burney said Westridge has always felt like a family, no matter if it was during her time as a student or a teacher.

"When I first started teaching at Westridge," Burney said, "there were still some people working there who were there when I was a kid. That helped make the transition to teaching here so much fun. The staff at Westridge has always done whatever needs to be done to make kids

successful. We have a fun saying, 'Once a Wildcat, always a Wildcat.' When kids leave to go to other schools, we love to know how they are doing. We always talk about the accomplishments of our alumni."

Although she has worked at other schools within the EPS District, Burney said she's been extremely proud to be at Westridge, saying it's her "family" outside of her real family.

"This is the only place I want to be," she said. "I know the people in this neighborhood, and cars drive by and honk to say hi to me. My



parents still live in the same house, so it's fun to see my students who live near them. And, of course, they get a kick out of knowing where my parents live. From my two kids to my niece, nephew and now two great-nephews, we've all attended Westridge Elementary and it's so fun to walk by a room and think about the fond memories I've made here."

According to the Elkhorn Historical Society, the first K-12 Elkhorn Public Schools facility was opened in 1930 (what is now the District Administration building). The seventh and eighth grade classes, along with the home economics class, were held in the gymnasium in 1952 (which was built separately to the north of the main building).

With the original building busting at the seams due to student population, Elkhorn Elementary School (now Westridge) was opened in the fall of 1961 to the northeast of the original schoolhouse. The facility was a two-story structure that cost \$347,000 to build. Just two years later in 1963, four additional classrooms were added to help mitigate the student population.

Several Historical Society members even recall the spring of 1962, when residents from Elkhorn and every surrounding community traveled to Elkhorn Elementary to receive their polio vaccines in the school's cafeteria since it was the building's largest room.

In turn, everyone who was in school in the early 1960s had to walk to Elkhorn Elementary to get lunch for the day since the gymnasium north of the 1930s building hadn't been converted into a cafeteria yet.

While he doesn't quite remember everything he did at 8 years old at the school, McArdle said he definitely remembers the uniqueness of the elementary's cafeteria.

"I can't remember what I had for lunch yesterday, but I do remember our cafeteria," he said. "It was the first cafeteria Elkhorn had so it's hard to forget it."

By 1975, Elkhorn Elementary was renamed Westridge due to Skyline Elementary entering the district.

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Since then, Westridge Elementary has received numerous additions and expansions, including an expansion consisting of a new media center, a computer lab, an art room, a music room, special education classrooms, an elevator and a gymnasium in 1992. By 1999, the west wing was opened and, in 2003, a third kindergarten room was added.

For Patsy Schmidt, member of the Historical Society and also known as a walking history book by many due to her knowledge surrounding Elkhorn, watching so much change happen within the community has been incredible.

But, one of the best things she said she's seen is Westridge reaching its 60th anniversary mark.

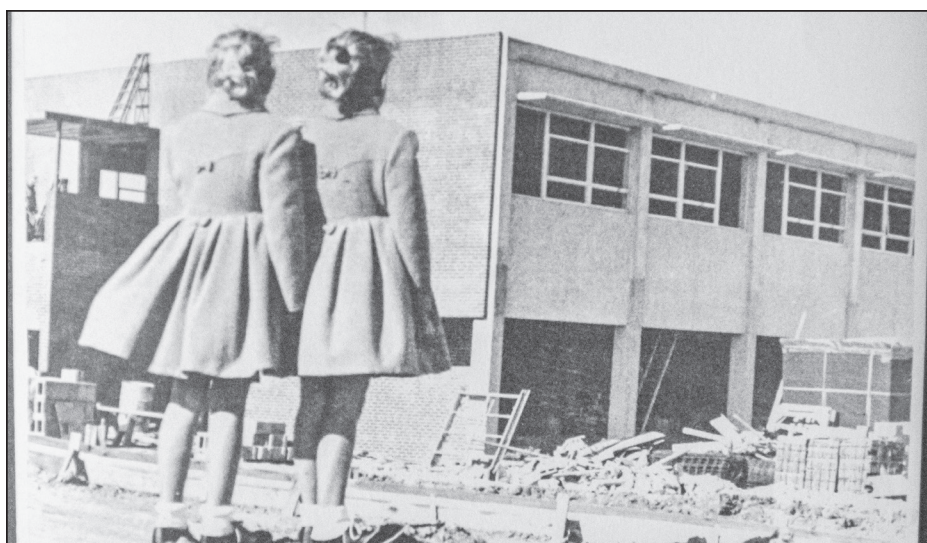
"It just means I've been out of school for 60 years," Schmidt laughed. "It seemed like all this growth happened so quickly, but it really didn't. The big growth came in 1976 when everyone decided to come out of Omaha and moved to our area out west. We were an attraction, and Elkhorn Public Schools was a real attraction as well, our district has been phenomenal. I also like to credit Paul Larson and Gene Krueger for going out and recruiting the rural kids to come to Elkhorn as we offered FFA, football and several various activities other schools didn't offer."

McArdle agreed, saying it's been wild to see the growth of the school district and the town itself over the last 60 years.

"There's really only one way to describe it," he said, "it's just hard to wrap your mind around it sometimes. It's amazing to see how things have changed, compared to what we got by with, back in the day. There are so many programs available nowadays that we simply didn't have or ever would have thought to have. It was a different world 60 years ago; now, it almost seems like a major corporation, with over a thousand employees at Elkhorn. Everything has just changed so much, it's crazy."

While the school itself has received many upgrades over the last few decades, Burney said the building has truly stood the test of time.

"There are parts that still look like it did when it first opened," she said. "Even though we are an 'old'



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In a photo from The Little Antler yearbook in 1962, twins Joyce and Jayne Schneider stand together as they watch Elkhorn Elementary (Westridge) be constructed in 1961.

building, it's exciting to celebrate 60 years of service. Countless students have walked through these hallways and I'm just blessed to have been one of those. I can't wait to see what the next decade will

bring for Westridge."

Schmidt said it's incredible how Elkhorn was able to sprout from a small community to a major hotspot in western Douglas County. With plenty of room to the north, Schmidt said no one really knows what could happen as the EPS District continues forward into the future.

However, Schmidt remains very proud of the fact all the oldest facilities in the district still sit proudly in downtown Elkhorn.

"It's really about the staying power of our community," Schmidt said. "It's astounding to see everything come full circle, with our children and grandchildren staying here and now attending school here in Elkhorn. While we continue to grow, it's fun to see Olde Towne still alive, all while keeping our hometown feeling. And, it's cool to see the school buildings still around. From the District Administration building in the 30s and Westridge in the early 60s, for these buildings to still stand strong despite the years is amazing."