

Parents In Principal's Book Club Create 'Culture Of Reading' At Home

By **Laura E. Winchester**

Suburban Correspondent

- Updated: February 12, 2012, 7:02 AM

So please, oh PLEASE, we beg and pray

Go throw your TV set away And in its place you can install A lovely bookshelf on the wall.

—Charlie and the Chocolate Factory by Roald Dahl

That plea would likely strike a chord with the group gathered around a conference table in Grand Island's Huth Road Elementary School Thursday evening.

About 14 mothers with children in the school's second through fifth grades were having a lively discussion about "Freedom Crossing," a book about abolition and the Underground Railroad by the late Margaret Goff Clark, a writer of young-adult novels who lived in the Town of Niagara.

At the monthly meeting of the Principal's Book Club, created by Principal Kerri Nowak, the moms expressed delight in the familiar setting of "Freedom Crossing" in Lewiston.

They watched the live webcam for the Freedom Crossing Monument on the Niagara River that commemorates Lewiston as one of the last stops on the Underground Railroad, which assisted slaves escaping to freedom in Canada in the early to mid-1800s. Also circulated were photographs of Tyron's Folly, a Lewiston home with four cellars where slaves hid.

The discussion, facilitated by Nowak, moved from slavery to racism. One mother said she was struck by how there was not "much difference in mentality" between the time period depicted in "Freedom Crossing" and that in "The Help," which was set "100 years later."

Kathryn Stockett's novel about the life of black maids in Alabama at the dawn of the 1960s' Civil Rights era was last month's book club selection.

Nowak launched the club—which meets for an hour before the school's monthly PTA meetings—in September 2010 to help parents “create a culture of reading for their families.” She had the approval of School Superintendent Robert Christmann, who she said “loved the idea of getting parents involved.”

Heidi Clarke, a fourth-grade reading teacher, —the level at which “Freedom Crossing” is included—sees the advantage of the Book Club. “Parents are good role models for reading,” she said.

Club participants choose the books to read, with selections ranging from young-adult literature to contemporary best-sellers. Next month's pick is “The Hunger Games,” a futuristic young-adult novel by Suzanne Collins. A movie version will be out in March.

Nowak said she follows an example set by one of her mentors, Barbara Marotto, retired principal of Smallwood School in Amherst.

“She often shared information with her families from the perspective of being a mother and teacher herself,” said Nowak, mother of three young children.

“Getting our children to complete the task ‘Read for 20 minutes’ that is on most homework lists can be challenging for parents,” said Nowak, who believes the book club supports that effort.

“Kids learn a great deal through imitation. If we want our children to love learning, they should see their parents enjoying reading. Our hope is that when parents model good reading habits and talk about reading with their children, their children will do the same,” she said.

Nowak, who said she “used to do most of my reading in bed after my children were asleep,” now takes her book “into their room at night while they read theirs. We find ourselves talking to each other about what we are reading.”

“Sometimes the only thing better than getting lost in a good story is to be able to share that story with someone you love,” she said.

Parents at Thursday's meeting related similar experiences, including discussions that followed their children asking, “Why are you reading a kid's book?” Several said they like being able to talk to their children about the books they're reading because they also have read them.

And Sandra Cohen, who has a son in first grade and a daughter in third grade at Huth Road, added a twist: “I joined this club because I hadn't been taking time to read just for pleasure.”

