



food for thought

Books Between Bites satisfies audience on at least 2 fronts

BY MONICA M. WALK Special to The Reporter

Food provides bodily fuel as well as pleasure for the palate.

Reading works brain cells while inspiring thought.

In combination, a meal accompanied by literature and conversation nourishes both mind and body. And all this can be ingested and enjoyed in a monthly Books Between Bites gathering in downtown Fond du Lac.

It's a lunchtime special marking more than 20 years on this community's social menu.

Already a dedicated volunteer at Salem United Methodist Church, Karen Kalsbeek was intrigued when a then-new pastor mentioned a lunch-time program popular in the parish near the Madison Square where he recently had served.

That Books Between Bites program featured an outlet for thoughtful conversation for the many nearby office employees. Salem United Methodist's downtown location provided a similar venue. The idea resonated with Kalsbeek, and 21 years later she continues to coordinate the Fond

Karen Kalsbeek, a founder and organizer of the popular Books Between Bites program, waits for the speaker to begin a book review. *The Reporter photo by Patrick Flood*

du Lac Books Between Bites program.

The premise seems simple enough: Bring a sack lunch, make a donation for coffee or soda, and hear a book review during a 40-minute midday meal break. The event wraps up sweetly with a gift of cookies from the church.

Summer Planning

But, each of those seven annual presentations is the result of a summer planning meeting, additional conversations and networking, culminating in personal invitations from Kalsbeek.

"Over the years, we've hardly ever been turned down. The presenters have been phenomenal," Kalsbeek said. "People are willing to do it, even though it is work for them. We offer only an audience and exposure within the community—and a sandwich and cookies."

Kalsbeek ensures the entire lineup for the year is firmed up and distributed in a printed list

Name: Karen Kalsbeek

Age: 63

Years in the community: 37, arrived in 1974

Occupation: Founder and organizer of Books Between Bites, ongoing since 1990

Location: Fellowship Hall, Salem United Methodist Church, 120 Shelbygan St.

When: Second Tuesday of the month, September through November and January through April; 12-10-12:50 p.m.

Reaction to being nominated for a Success section story: "I'm flattered. I'm pleased the program will get more presence in the community."

To what do you owe your measure of success? "This is not something I do by myself. The fact is that I've had people work with me to come up with presenters and books. And, it's great to have people say 'yes' when I ask them to present."

before the first September presentation. The list is mailed to those who sign up for the mailing list, and individual presentation dates often are highlighted by local media. These details are handled by Kalsbeek, who also coordinates the church's Annual October Apple Harvest festival, serves as the local AAJW chapter's historian and prepares taxes during tax season.



These women serve as the planning group for Books Between Bites at Salem United Methodist Church in Fond du Lac. From left are Lois Farber, Diane Fricker, Alma Grace, Julie Francisco and Karen Kalsbeek. *The Reporter photo by Patrick Flood*

"Our goal is to have something different to do on a lunch hour for people downtown," Kalsbeek said. "Something to stretch their minds, perhaps. People love it. We've been blessed with great presentors."

Pastor Jack Stubbs is delighted with Kalsbeek's work organizing the program during the four years they've known each other.

"It's really a community program, with people from all over Fond du Lac," he said. "Karen's genius is that she chooses well-respected, interesting people that people want to hear. The books are being reviewed by someone interesting. And, I've found the people who come are delightful themselves."

Wide Range of Topics

The range of book topics is wide and deep. Sometimes, Kalsbeek's advisory group suggests a title and then searches for the individual to present the book. Other times, an individual is invited to share a book of his or her own selection. While presentors may resappear on the docket, they aren't likely to repeat within a two-year period. And no book has ever been repeated.

Books have included popular fiction and non-fiction, spirituality, local and regional history, sports, relationships, poetry, memoirs, health issues and global events. Presentation styles range from typical "school book reports" to video, power point and photographic presentations. Most presentations include conversation with attendees.

Monthly attendance ranges from groups averaging in the mid-30s to as high as the low-90s, totting their lunches to the Fellowship Hall.

The largest attendance topped at 93 for Anita Anderson's 1988 presentation on the book, "Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus." The September 2011 presentation of "Secrets of the Lodge" by author Dwight O. Welser drew an audience of 72.

Impact of Fond du Lac Reads

Kalsbeek pays special attention to the annual Fond du Lac Reads selection and dedicates a Books Between Bites presentation to the citywide choice.

"We are just down the street from the library, and it makes sense to participate," she said.

She noted that local retired teacher and coach Sal Curcurio to address this year's "When Pride Still Matters: A Life of Vince Lombardi" on Oct. 11 promised to be a great match. "He said, 'You know, he's St. Vincent to us,'" Kalsbeek said with a laugh.

Since presentors share much of themselves in their book interpretations, many presentations remain memorable long after the event.

Kalsbeek recalled Vietnam veteran Ben Roder, who had recently made a return visit to Vietnam with his wife, addressing "The Things They Carried" by Tim O'Brien. "He didn't like the book," Kalsbeek said. "We told him he could present however he wanted, and he chose to read some of the stories.



Top: Sal Curcurio, a former football coach, reviews "When Pride Still Matters," a biography of Green Bay Packers coach Vince Lombardi, at a recent Books Between Bites program.

center: Shirley Patman listens closely with her hand on her chin to the speaker at Books Between Bites at Fellowship Hall in Salem United Methodist Church.

bottom: Florence and James Williams of Fond du Lac enjoy a bite of lunch while the speaker reviews a book for the audience. *The Reporter photos by Patrick Flood*

The audience was spellbound. It was great."

The meeting scheduled on 9/11/01 when New York's Twin Towers were attacked proved another memorable gathering.

"Dr. Kristine Krumenauer, an art professor from Marian, was

scheduled to speak on a book about Georgia O'Keeffe," Kalsbeek said. "We went ahead and had Books Between Bites. We did pause...but the world isn't supposed to come to a standstill because people have done this. It seemed like a good thing to be doing."