



# COLBY FREE PRESS

## Charter School has successful first semester

By Tisha Cox

Colby Free Press

Students at Thomas County Academy, the Colby School District's charter school, have finished up their final projects for the finish of its first semester. Lead teacher Kristin Eberle couldn't be happier with the progress of the students and the school itself.

"Everything has gone exceptionally well," she said.

Grades fifth through eight were accepted for the inaugural year.

Eberle said it's taken some time to adjust, and they've struggled the most with taking responsibility for their own education, but they have made the transition successfully.

"They're becoming self-directed," she said. "I feel like they've done a great job at this."

Students have adapted faster than at other charter schools.

"They've taken responsibility of their own education," she said.

Fifteen students are enrolled this year — two fifth graders, four sixth graders, five seventh graders and four eighth graders. Expansion next year depends on how much money is available, but they're concentrating on what they have this year.

The idea for the charter school came about three years ago, and grew out of looking at what skills students will need in the workforce when they finish school. It gives students the opportunity to work at their own pace, and work on hands-on projects.

Students got into the school through an application process last spring. Students entering grades five through eight were eligible.

Each student has an individualized learning plan, and they are responsible for their own work and schedule. They also work at their own pace, and have more hands-on opportunities than a regular classroom setting.

Eberle explained students in the charter school work through the same material as their counterparts in the district's traditional classrooms, but they get to spend as much time on the material as they need.

They have a textbook to guide them, but it isn't their only resource. One student built an iguana cage as part of his math and science work. Students get to spend time on their interests. They also do a lot of curriculum work online, and spend time reading.

Students have to do presentations to show they've learned the mate-

**“ They’re (students) becoming self-directed. I feel like they’ve done a great job.”**

Kristin Eberle,  
academy lead teacher

rial and have to meet all of their standards to move on. Eberle said they don't get grades like an "A" or "B."

If they don't meet all the standards, students have to redo parts of their work to try to move on.

While students have made the transition to being responsible for their own educations, their parents have also had to adjust. Eberle said there's been a lot of collaboration between parents and the school.

As part of the parent involvement, she'll be giving parents a semester update and discussing plans and standards for next semester.

On the administration side, Eberle is the full-time teacher at the academy and oversees everything.

There is a part-time math teacher and other teachers offer seminars during the week. If a student is interested, they can sign up for that particular seminar, which is part of how the students do their own schedules each week.

Day to day and week to week, no two have been alike all semester.

"It's new every day," she said.

That flexibility is at the heart of what the school is about, yet the students have managed to forge a close bond.

A soup supper last week and a chili cook-off during the Celebration on the High Plains in September have helped build community. At the cook-off, the students won the sportsmanship award.

The older kids have also realized they're role models for the younger students, and help them out when they get the chance.

Now that the first semester is complete, she's already looking to the spring semester. They will be doing things much the same way as the first, although over break, Eberle plans to redesign the science curriculum, and she hopes for more one-on-one interaction for students.

She added so far, the student presentations have been "exceptional."

"This environment can definitely work," Eberle said.

## Santa City volunteers wanted



TISHA COX/Colby Free Press

Colby/Thomas County Chamber director Mary Ann Downing boxed up stuffed animals at Santa City today. More help will be needed at 9 a.m. Wednesday to take down the interior of Santa

City. Those who would like to help are invited and anyone who owns a pick-up truck is also welcome. Decorating and take down is all done by volunteers. For information, call 460-3401.

## Board learns about credentialing process

By Tisha Cox

Colby Free Press

Colby School District students will get credentials for their school work.

Curriculum director Diana Wieland explained it is all part of the K-12 Transitions program that will be implemented in the next few years.

"It's an accreditation model above and beyond state requirements. It will help students make the transition from school to school, and school to career," she said.

The program makes sure students are prepared for the next level. So far, only five districts in the state are participating.

Included will be student credentialing that will gauge individual student growth and make sure they're prepared for the next level.

"We're just beginning to get

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Diana Wieland, curriculum director

started," Wieland said. "We want to make sure we don't lose any kids."

She gave the board a implementation timetable of the next five months and outlined the steps they'll be taking at each school.

Components of Transitions are a written school improvement plan, credentialing, individual student intervention plans, articulation between sending and receiving schools, aligning and restructuring the system to support transitions and aligning and selecting processes to support transitions.

In January, school credential forms and transition documents will be finished as well Power-School to store data.

Parents will get information on the transition's process in February during parent/teacher conferences and will be provided a copy of the draft credentialing form.

Eighth graders and their parents will get information on the high school credentialing form in the spring.

In May, the first credentialing will be done with fifth- and eighth-grade reading and they will do a pilot credential process with graduating seniors.

Each of the principals also talked about how they're preparing.

Colby Grade School principal Terrel Harrison said they will get measures on student data and train in January. She said if students meet all the necessary criteria, they will be credentialed. If not, they could credential with interventions.

Robb Ross, Colby Middle School principal, said their forms are similar to those at the grade school. He said they will be focusing on responsibility/attendance, and they have found getting work completed

in time would solve many academic problems.

"It's not a matter of kids failing tests," Ross said, "but not turning assignments in on time, or fully completed."

At the end of this school year, school staff will meet with parents to explain the process and to work on high school placement with eighth graders.

High school principal Rocky Robbins said he is looking at state assessments and graduation requirements, and are proposing to tie both into early graduation and reduced senior schedules.

By running this year's graduating seniors through the process, they'll get a better idea of how to come up with a four-year plan for incoming freshman.

"We'll see how it comes out then modify it," he said.

In other business, the board appointed Rhonda Kropp as board clerk. She replaces Marilyn Reed who is retiring this month after 36 years with the district. The board approved the 2006-2007 academic calendar. The school year begins Aug. 24 and ends May 25, 2007.

## Christian couple develops faith with the eight days of Hanukkah

John Van Nostrand

Colby Free Press Publisher

While the sun set Sunday marking the end of Christmas Day, another holiday was just beginning for a Colby couple.

Today is one of the eight days of Hanukkah, a Jewish holiday acknowledged by Jim and Henrietta Vollmer. Hanukkah is an event commemorating the rededication of the Temple of Jerusalem in 165 B.C.

Although the couple has a Christian foundation, their research of Hanukkah and Hebrew have influenced them to commemorate the holiday.

"We are believers," Jim said about their Christian faith.

But what happened one day in 1997 changed their perspective.

While living in Colorado, the couple were invited to a Passover celebration in Fort Collins, Colo. An interpreted Messianic rabbi's message convicted Jim to study the history of Hebrew. Messianic is a branch of the Jewish faith that believes in the purpose and teachings of Jesus Christ.

"On the way out I kept saying, 'I don't think we know all what we have been enveloped into,'" Jim said.

Jim, 63, and Henrietta, 59, started researching what the rabbi said and also met with a Messianic Jewish group. Jim said he was compelled by the history of the "children of Israel," an umbrella label for Jewish people. Jesus Christ was also Jewish.

Further research revealed a Hanukkah reference in the Bible, more evidence for the Vollmers to respect Hannukah. The holiday is usually held in either late November or during December.

John 10: 22-23 states, "Now it was the Feast of Dedication in Jerusalem and it was winter, and Jesus walked in the temple..." Hanukkah is also known as the Feast of Dedication.

"We don't make a big deal out of Hanukkah, but this one holiday we have fun with," Jim said. "We don't celebrate Christmas, but we love everybody that does," Henrietta said.

The Vollmers are also learning the Hebrew language, that is strong



JOHN VAN NOSTRAND/Colby Free Press

Jim and Henrietta Vollmer begin the eight days of Hanukkah.

in Jewish history and common among Jewish customs.

"Most of it is self taught," Henrietta said.

One of Christmas' most popular symbols is the Christmas tree. A Hanukkah symbol is the menorah,

a candle holder.

The rededication of the temple included how a group of Jews, known as the Maccabees, defeated the Syrians who had damaged the temple. The Maccabees wanted to relight the temple's menorah but

only had enough oil for the menorah for one day. Eight days were needed to prepare additional oil for use in the temple. But that one day of oil lasted eight days. Jewish history calls those eight days a "great miracle."

The Vollmers have a menorah in their home. A candle is cumulatively lit during each day of Hanukkah. The one candle used to the light the others is called the shamash, known as the "servant candle."

Western influence on Jews and Hannukah over the years has included gift giving, similar to Christmas, during the eight days.

One Hanukkah traditions is the dreidel game. A dreidel is a four-sided top and each side is the initial Hebrew letter from the words, "A great miracle happened there." Traditional Hanukkah foods include potato pancakes, called latkes, and jelly doughnuts. Jewish holidays begin at sunset.

Since the closest Messianic Jewish synagogue is hundreds of miles away in Denver, Colo., or metro-Kansas City, the Vollmers develop their faith at home. When living in Colorado, they attended syna-

gogue. The Vollmers moved to Colby in June and, through e-mail and mutual friends, have found a few other western Kansas people who are Messianic Jews to share their faith with.

"We are not trying to convert anybody," Henrietta said. "Hanukkah is a time of dedication. It doesn't matter if your Jew or Gentile, we all need to dedicate our lives to God."

The Vollmers lived in the Jewish country of Israel on the West Bank in 1998 and 1999.

"Messianics there are outnumbered, but not intimidated," Jim said.

They said living in Israel, and not being full-blooded Jewish, is difficult to the point where it is a struggle to stay in the Jewish country. Henrietta said there is a level of favoritism toward those who are full Jewish.

"In Israel, if you can't prove you're Jewish," Henrietta said.

The Vollmers said they appreciate their faith immensely.

"It's been an incredible walk with the Lord," Henrietta said. "We've never been bored with it. We get more excited."