

Food has been important to Ruth Leistner since before getting involved with popular strawberry shortcake campaign

Kate Grigg

Thursday, March 12, 2015 7:45:28 EDT PM



KATE GRIGG/SPECIAL TO THE PACKET & TIMES Ruth Leistner will prepare strawberry-shortcake orders for the 15th time this March. The annual Westmount United Church Strawberry Shortcake Takeout will happen March 25.

They trust God they will have enough strawberries, Ruth says. Heading out in June (or sometimes for the fall crops), not in any organized fashion, individual congregation members picking berries as they would for their own use, only they're picking for the church, Westmount United. Filling up their freezers, sometimes to bursting, trusting spring will come, friends and fellowship and faith will endure. And thereby imbuing the annual Westmount United Church Strawberry Shortcake Takeout with a sweetness beyond berries and sugar.

Sometimes Ruth Leistner picks a few extra for her own enjoyment, but since girlhood, Ruth has associated food with more than the pleasure of consumption; since growing up in Coldwater, food has been about people and faith. Working alongside her mother at Coldwater United, the two of them serving wedding dinners. Working behind the scenes, no time to gaze at the glowing bride, beyond the reach of the tossed bouquet but in the thick of it in more important ways. The busy hands of the women binding the bride and groom together in ways beyond ceremony and words, work and love being inseparable forces.

As Ruth learned from her dad, who, having had to take over much of the load when his own father lost a leg in a work accident (Ruth's dad was 14 at the time), saw no reason his daughter shouldn't be exposed to the value of work. Didn't matter she was a girl when he needed some help tearing down a house, some nails pulled out of boards. Didn't matter she'd rather be playing school, which Ruth preferred to anything else. Somehow knowing from age three or four, before she'd been to school herself, she wanted to be a teacher. Knowing perhaps from seeing the preacher teach from the pulpit, or from the Sunday-school classes she attended that someone standing at the head of a room sharing knowledge and ideas could lead a mind and heart to new and better places.

Sitting outside at Camp Simpresca one summer, Ruth was overtaken by a wave of peace and certainty and inspiration so intense, she knew it would inform the rest of her life. That it would be there to guide and sustain her as she made her way forward. As she drove off in her first car (Ruth's father refused to let her leave the yard until she'd learned how to change a tire), and graduated teachers' college. As she tried her best to emulate Shirley Gladall and Dorothy Pheasant, favourite teachers who had the knack of making each student feel like a person in his or her own right, an individual with something to contribute. Even though that first teaching post in a Toronto gymnasium with only portable blackboards between Ruth and the earshot of a far more experienced teacher tested her to the limit.

Something of her dad's uncompromising approach in her teaching, always striving for excellence, maintaining high standards. A style some parents appreciated and others didn't, but one Ruth couldn't change any more than she could change the colour of her eyes or the Golden Rule. She had to give them something to aim for, some measure that gave life perspective and meaning, the opportunity to expand their potential. How it thrilled her to see the light in their eyes when they learned to read or some new discovery pushed back the boundaries of their world.

Even when Ruth had children of her own, she still had the energy and the room in her heart for all the little souls that passed through her classroom. Enchanted by some, fearing for others, some names and faces etched on her memory for life. And when she became a single parent, carried on bolstered by faith and the rewards of teaching. (She and the girls gamely doing their own home repairs and renovations.) As she is determined to manage one last assignment, now that her days in the classroom are over, her years at Uptergrove, David H. and Orchard Park, her decade running a home daycare. An assignment that will take all the stamina and compassion Ruth can muster, now that her mother has been overtaken by Alzheimer's.

Forcing Ruth to mine all the richness and lessons of the years. Remember her mother serving dinners at the church, the caring, competent woman who took cleaning work to pay for Ruth's piano lessons. Remember the children Ruth taught in primary classes, the gulf between her mind and theirs, how they live in another world. Remember the trust in their eyes as her mother slips into childlike-ness, then to a place no one can reach. Remember her father teaching her to tackle any task. And the transcendent touch she felt one day sitting beneath a summer sky.

Take comfort in the things that endure, the strawberries in her freezer waiting to be thawed, the bustle and companionship of strawberry shortcake day. The sharp 8 a.m. start, the cakes to be cut, the cream to be whipped, the berries to be sugared and slipped into boxes, whisked off to homes and offices, lifted on spoons to smiling mouths.

Find joy in the intensity of work, the familiar surroundings of the church auditorium, working shoulder to shoulder among the crowd of tables, inhaling the light, tantalizing aroma. Sighing as, the last order completed, Ruth and her co-workers sit down to enjoy their own slice of strawberry shortcake, and delectable heady return of spring.

Orders for the Westmount United Church Strawberry Shortcake Takeout (\$3.50 each) must be placed by March 20 and are available for pickup 10 a.m. to noon March 25. To place an order, call Lorraine at 705-325-3573.

Kate Grigg is an artist and writer who grew up in Orillia and tells stories of local people in her weekly column. If you have a story you think she might be interested in, email kategrigg@gmail.com.
