



Staff photo by E.J. Harris
Washington Elementary School fourth-grader Grace Welch talks to her mother, Anny Welch, after competing in the Sudexo Future Chef Challenge on Friday at Sherwood Elementary School in Pendleton.

CHEFS: Winner will go on to consideration for a regional prize

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Friday’s competition. As family and friends watched from the audience, the young chefs prepared their meals with the help of students from the Pendleton High School culinary arts program. Some of the dishes predated the competition. Washington Elementary School student Gisele Short said she eats her chocolate pumpkin muffins once a week for breakfast, sometimes baking them with her mom and other times by herself. Other competitors found alternative sources for their recipes. Grace Welch, also a student at Washington, found her veggie plate recipe on Pinterest. She lamented that she had to display her dish in a paper cup instead of a larger platter, which would have allowed her to arrange the vegetables in the shape of a turkey. Despite this setback, Welch said the veggie plate went over well the first time she made it, during her family’s Thanksgiving. Chloe Chay took a combination approach to her macaroni and cheese, having found the basic recipe online while adding in her own elements like salt, pepper and broccoli. Prior to Future Chefs, most of Chay’s culinary experience involved helping her mom prepare meals. But seeing her older sister take a cooking class inspired her to enter the



Staff photo by E.J. Harris
Pendleton Mayor John Turner, acting as a judge, tastes a sample of a student-cooked entrée during the Sudexo Future Chef Challenge on Friday at Sherwood Elementary in Pendleton.

competition and try her own hand at making food. “I like cooking because you can try new things,” she said. After the competitors finished making their dish, the audience was allowed to approach the students and sample their wares while judges began evaluating the food. The judges’ panel was comprised of local dignitaries — Pendleton School Board chairwoman Debbie McBee, superintendent Andy Kovach, Pendleton Mayor John Turner and Bruce Hollowell, the Milton-Freewater Unified School District director of nutrition services. The winner of Friday’s event will then go on to consideration for a regional prize. Regional winners will be featured on the Sodexo’s national website, where the public can vote for their dish. Eastern Oregon has

been represented in the Sodexo challenge before — Milton-Freewater student Meredith Moore made it all the way to the finals in 2014. Hollowell said Moore’s run was before his time, but the challenges were important to younger students interested in extracurriculars outside of sports. Even if the top contestants’ journey ends with a prize basket, one of which included a drone, the finalists could spark an interest that’s developed as they grow older. Sodexo general manager Suzanne Howard said Future Chefs could act as a feeder to Kristin Swaggart’s high school culinary arts program, which also places an emphasis on health and competition. Contact Antonio Sierra at asierra@eastoregonian.com or 541-966-0836.

MABEL: Applicants must correctly answer six of 10 questions pulled from a pool of 100

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often assumed she was from Mexico. The first time someone asked where she was from, instead of what part of Mexico she was from, she was thrilled. Cultural and language differences aside, Mabel long considered herself as much an American as anyone from the United States. “We’re taught we are one whole continent,” she said. “I’m (an American) from Central America.” She aspired to be an architect in Managua, and like other Nicaraguan high schoolers took the national exam to establish what she could study in college. Her score was not high enough for that career, she said. She considered a degree in industrial engineering, but instead hit on accounting. “I think I saw it as an opportunity to get a job in any company,” she said.

Finding roots

Stephen presented another opportunity. He was in Roxboro on a construction job. She said he was affectionate and kind and a hard worker, traits she also attributed to her father, Armando Largaespada. Stephen grew up in Atlanta, Mabel said, but he is a real “county boy” compared to her urban upbringing. She remains close to a wide circle of friends going back to elementary school, while Stephen’s construction occupation demanded moving every few months and afforded him few close friends. Their families did not let differences get in the way. Mabel said her dad always asked how Stephen was, and her grandmother took a shining to him, a rare circumstance. Stephen’s father lives in Mountain Home, Idaho, but sees the couple often. “Mabel’s my daughter,” Steve Dean Sr. said. “It doesn’t matter where she was from. I treat her just like she was one of my kids.” They married about a year after they met. Mabel earned an online bachelor’s degree in business and they lived wherever his work took them, whenever it took them. “We were moving after every project,” she said. That left no time to put down roots, even when they had the boys. And that was a hurdle to applying for U.S. citizenship, which requires 90-day residency before submitting the 20-page application for naturaliza-

every three years, but that felt precarious with the constant threat of deportation hanging over them. Construction of Portland General Electric’s \$550 million gas-fired power plant in Boardman brought them to the area in 2015. They bought a house in Hermiston. When the construction company went bankrupt, Mabel and Stephen stuck it out. He got a job as the safety manager for Fisher Construction Group and works out of Richland, Washington. She started MLD Services out of their home. “We have a community ... we’re able to have friends. We love it here,” she said. “That’s when I decided it was time to become a citizen.”

The process

Mabel applied for naturalization in July 2016. The couple hired immigration lawyer Aliya Alisheva of Kennewick to avoid slip-ups. One missing document, Mabel said, can lead to months of setbacks. Even so, they had to wait until November before U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services confirmed Mabel had an interview in early January in Portland where she answered personal questions and provided tax records. “How quickly citizenship applications are processed depends entirely on which immigration office’s jurisdiction an applicant falls under,” Alisheva said. “For example, residents of Hermiston fall under the jurisdiction of the Portland Field Office that currently processes naturalization applications in approximately seven months.” Mabel’s marriage to a U.S. citizen gave the petition an “immediate relative” status and put her on the fast track, Alisheva said, which can be approximately four to five months. Processing Mabel’s application fell right in that window. Other categories are unmarried sons and daughters of U.S. citizens, which includes children over 21; spouses and children of lawful permanent residents; and finally siblings of U.S. citizens. “Currently,” Alisheva said, “the waiting period for the last category, if the qualified relative is from Mexico, is over 20 years.” That makes it difficult for people to obtain their lawful resident status, reunite with family or invest in a home, a career or their own education. “The whole system can get backlogged and overly

two key areas and streamline the process.” Immigration Services told Mabel to return Feb. 17 to take the civics exam, which requires applicants to correctly answer six of 10 questions pulled from a pool of 100. She said she was nervous for the test. The examiner led off with asking for the name of the national anthem. “I got stuck,” she said. She knew the song, she said, and still tears up whenever she hears it. The examiner pressed to move to the next question, she said, and she pressed him to stay until she blurted out the answer, “The Star-Spangled Banner.” “I got it,” she said. “So out of all the questions, that was the hardest one.” Five questions later, Mabel passed. She also demonstrated she could read and understand English. She joined several other immigrants for a ceremony that included a speech from a refugee whose story of coming to the States, she said, was far more dramatic than hers. Then they stood and swore the Oath of Allegiance and received the document that proves she is a citizen of the United States of America. “I’m super proud of her,” Stephen said. “This has been a goal for us.”

Travel status

Days later, bad news hit. Mabel’s father was dying back in Nicaragua. She wanted to see him before he died, but she did not have a U.S. passport. Given her new status, she said that her Nicaraguan passport might not get her back into the U.S. She tried on Feb. 28 to obtain a passport and said she was even willing to travel to Seattle to meet with U.S. State Department officials to expedite the process, but it was to no avail. Her father died that day. “Not being able to see him again, it broke my heart,” she said. Still, Mabel said, life has to go on. And she has to be strong for her children. “I know he would be proud of me,” she said. She has no regrets about becoming a U.S. citizen. She now has a political voice, she said, and can vote. She encouraged any foreign national who can apply for citizenship to do it. They need to stop worrying about the exam, stop waiting and just take that step. Contact Phil Wright at pwright@eastoregonian.com or 541-966-0833.

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First practice is Tuesday, March 21 from 5:30-6:45 at Umatilla High School. If you have any questions, please contact Sheri Brown at browns@umatillasd.org.

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