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There's magic in the bowl

By CHANTELLE MEYER
Siuslaw News

Author Maggie Stuckey brings 'Soup Night' to Siuslaw Public Library

“There’s just something about soup,” Portland-area author Maggie Stuckey said.

She listed some of the words that people think of when they think about soup: comforting, heartwarming, nutritious, warm, homey and easy.

“With soup, there’s always enough,” she said.

Stuckey will present excerpts of her recipe book “Soup Night” at two soup-based events at Siuslaw Public Library. The first will be held at the Florence location, 1460 Ninth St., Wednesday, Jan. 27, at 6 p.m. The second will be at the Mapleton location, 88148 Riverview Ave., at noon the following day, Thursday, Jan. 28.

“Soup Night” tells the story of communities that gather to share a meal together.

“People exclusively and deliberately set out to do something that would bring their neighbors together,” Stuckey said.

Neighborhoods from Portland, Ore., to the American South came up with the idea individually, but Stuckey thinks she is the first to write about the cultural phenomenon.

“It’s definitely a human trait, because we’ve been doing this since the cave-man,” she said.

Her book illustrates 30 groups and the different ways they prepare a meal together. The core of “Soup Night,” however, is her brother’s neighborhood on Stanton Street in Northeast Portland.

“The first time I went, I was standing on my brother’s porch and along the sidewalk came this parade of people walking by, carrying their soup bowls. It’s the most charming thing I ever saw,” Stuckey said.

Most Soup Nights are wrapped around the philosophy “come empty, leave full.” People bring their own dishes so the host doesn’t have extra work to do. According to the Siuslaw Public Library, dishes will be provided for the local Soup Night presentations.

A dash of success

The Stanton Street group formed more than 20 years ago when a mother wanted her neighborhood to be safe for her children.

“In most of the Soup Nights that I wrote about, they opened up their doors to everybody, including people they don’t know,” Stuckey said. “Sometimes that means there are people there you wouldn’t necessarily develop a friendship with, because their lives are too different, but when they sit down and eat together, they discover the common humanity that we all have.”

The first Soup Night on Stanton Street soon became a regular occurrence, even after the host burned the soup.

“When I interviewed these folks, I kept hearing the same thing over and over again: it’s made our neighborhood



COURTESY PHOTOS

Author Maggie Stuckey

like a small town. We’ve got that small town goodness going,” Stuckey said.

Some groups formed in geographic regions, like a neighborhood, but some Soup Nights formed around nonprofit organizations, common interests and even just a love of soup.

Stuckey was adamant that Soup Night can bridge all differences.

“It’s a testament to the concept of diversity, if you think about what diversity really means,” she said.

The Stanton Street group consists of the elderly, a young couple with a baby, people in their 30s, 40s and 50s, young retirees, African Americans, gay couples and small families.

“You couldn’t pick an area where people are more different,” she said.

“Because of those differences, in a normal pattern of events, they would not form friendships.”

They come from various religious faiths and all kinds of professions and occupations, and their political ideas range from far left to far right.

Recipe for goodwill

A behavioral counselor once said to Stuckey, “It’s hard to hate people when you sit down and eat with them.”

She noticed positive interactions over the whole neighborhood or region.

“When you surround yourself with people you care about, and who care about you, and you’re all watching out for each other, it changes people. It makes them kinder. They feel connected,” she said. “There’s a blanket of goodwill hanging over the whole block, and it changes people in a very good way.”

Stuckey was impressed with the children who grew up in a Soup Night culture.

“How valuable it is for children’s understanding of the world to have regular exposure to people who maybe think a little differently, or go to a different church or come from a different racial background,” she said. “They



The Friends of the Siuslaw Public Library will prepare African peanut soup, taco soup and vegetarian potato cheese soup for the Soup Nights in Florence and Mapleton on Jan. 27 and 28. Children and families are welcome at the events.

learn to see the world as a big wide-open space with lots of great people in it.”

Children are especially welcome at the Siuslaw Public Library’s two events.

“Because of the time, librarian Kevin Mitte thought that families with children would be able to come to the Mapleton event,” she said. “I love having kids there. They always have great questions.”

From early October to April, Stuckey plans on more than 37 Soup Night events at libraries in small to medium cities in Washington and Oregon.

“I had absolutely no idea how this would be received and if the libraries would think it was a worthwhile thing to do,” she said. “I have to confess, I was completely unprepared for the response. It’s very heartwarming and makes me feel so good. The people who come to the programs have a good time and we always have good soup.”

Come to the table

Volunteer chefs with Friends of the Siuslaw Public Library (FOL) will be preparing three soups from “Soup Night” for the two events: African peanut soup, taco soup and vegetarian potato cheese soup. There will also be bread.

She is pleased to come to Florence and Mapleton after planning with library staff and FOL volunteers.

“They’ve been wonderfully supportive,” Stuckey said. I can’t wait to get there. I’m thrilled to meet everybody.”



SOUP NIGHT
RECIPES for CREATING COMMUNITY
AROUND A POT OF SOUP



“When people gather for Soup Nights, you can smell the soup, but it is mostly auditory. You can hear how happy the people are to be together,” Stuckey said.

“Soup Night” features 100 recipes for soup, many of them compiled from the Soup Night groups around the country.

Stuckey said, “My theory is, anyone that can read can cook. After a while, you develop a taste for what goes well. You can bring your own taste to favorite recipes, and soon you’re cooking from scratch. And sometimes it’s a failure,” she said with a laugh. “People are still going to love you anyway.”

That is truly what soup is about for Stuckey.

“There’s something magical about soup. There’s magic in that bowl,” she said.

For more information about Soup Night at Siuslaw Public Library, call 541-997-3132 or visit siuslawlibrary.info.

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