

Wimberley View

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KAPS: A small charter school filling big dreams



Photo by Sharon Carter

Meeshawn Clements, Kaylyn Ritke, Orion Clayton, and Garrett Fine participated in a round table discussion about their experience at KAPS.

BY **Sharon Carter**
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In 1998, a tiny public charter high school was established on the northern edge of Wimberley in a fixer-upper flanked by two broken down buses. It was named after the founder's favorite author, Katherine Anne Porter, one of Texas' most outstanding writers of fiction. "At that time, enrolled students were fleeing the schools they came from," according to new principal, Dave Thomasson. "Today's students choose KAPS because they are hungry for what they can receive from this school.

It's the kids with a strong creative drive who come here — artists, writers, performers, musicians, photographers, crafters, builders — who have ideas and wheels always turning," Thomasson added. "They see things and want to communicate what they see."

For the tightly knit student body of 150 teens, Katherine Anne Porter is not just a school name. Holding on to history, each can tell us who Porter was and relate to her independent appetite.

Katherine Anne Porter School is a generation II charter school, which means that it was established in the second year of charter schools in Texas. It is open enrollment serving grades 9-12. Students come from Blanco, Canyon Lake, San Marcos, Austin, and Dripping springs school districts.

Principal Dave Thomasson began as a teacher in 1999 after repairing the two broken down buses. He had retired from Air Force aircraft maintenance, and was working on his masters in education at Texas State. Thomasson was researching charter schools at the time he came across KAPS.

He wore many hats for three years during KAPS formative transition, which included the school's move to its present location in Wimberley on FM2325. A beneficial arrangement was made with the Mince family who sold their building for a generous discount, and the staff re-modeled it into classrooms. Colorful murals, painted by students, deck the walls.

The school prepares students for college and careers with teaching professionals, counselors, and a comprehensive curriculum that meets the highest AP public school standards. Even though the structure is nontraditional "laissez-faire", students are held accountable for their choices and special encouragement is given to those who lag in motivation.

Classes are small.

Students maintain that motivation is based on love for their teachers who also befriend them...and "no one wants to disappoint a friend."

Thomasson, not your artistic type, is an advocate. In local communities, where writers, artists and musicians often provide their diligently skilled service without payment, or use tip buckets, this principal will buy his students' artwork. That sends a small but impressive message, which values artists as professionals who lend a very significant contribution to the quality of society.

Four students, Orion Clayton, Garrett Fine, Kaylyn Ritke, and Meeshawn Clements, joined a round table discussion of life at KAPS.

All said that siblings or cousins had previously attended KAPS with devotion, and that this kindled the desire to follow. Networking spreads the word that entices enrollment. Presently there are even 30-50 in the waiting pool since the school is at capacity.

"My sister thought it was fun," said Meeshawn. "High school is hard because you are another number. Here teachers want to know you one on one."

Garrett's dream is to own a restaurant as a chef, and travel throughout Europe polishing his cooking skills. Orion loves cars and believes his best artistic expression would be achieved designing and building automobiles. Kaylyn is a people person and wants to work as a dietician, physical therapist, or acupuncturist. Meeshawn, a photographer in her journalism class, hopes to intern with National Geographic and travel the world.

Some teenagers feel different. Well, maybe all teens feel "different" everywhere. They need to fit in, and not feel exposed on the edge of the flock — perhaps a biological predatory precaution. John Steinbeck observed in his novel "East of Eden" that if it was a school trend for minors to wear a necklace of pork chops about necks, all would be wearing them.

"We are very different from each other," said Orion, "but there are no group clicks, or outcasts. Everyone here is mutually accepted and respected."

"There is one big unity," added Kaylyn. "Teachers are real with us, and there are no favorites because they are all great."

"Everyone likes a subject like math because they love the math teacher who gives us each the attention we need," said

About Katherine Anne Porter



Katherine Anne Porter, a Texas native, has been acknowledged by critics as one of the finest writers of the twentieth century.

Founder of KAPS Yana Bland, and her husband, David, initially bought one of Porter's childhood homes located along FM150 in Kyle. The plan was to restore the house and make it into a museum honoring Porter.

The house once belonged to the writer's grandmother, Catherine Anne, referred to as "Aunt Cat", by neighbors. Porter, who was born at Indian Creek, Texas in 1890 with the given name of Callie, moved to Kyle with her father and siblings after her mother died, and stayed until age eleven when her grandmother died.

At the age of 25, while pursuing her well-traveled career as a journalist and fiction writer, the beautiful and spirited Callie legally changed her "byline" to Katherine Anne Porter. She won the Pulitzer Prize for "Collected Short Stories of Katherine Anne Porter" in 1965, and is best known for her only novel, "Ship of Fools" which took 25 years to write and was published 18 years before her death at College Park, Md., in 1980.

As a frequent lecturer, Porter had hoped that the University of Texas would grant a room to house her work, Texas being "the native land of my heart", however, the University of Maryland made this provision, instead.

Katherine Anne Porter "School" was a spin off of Bland's original dream to honor this author, because the couple sold the Kyle house to Texas State University after they failed to obtain financial support for their museum project.

Texas State Associate Vice President of University Advancement Carroll Wiley and MFA Program in Creative Writing Director Tom Grimes did raise the money needed to follow through with a plan. Kyle ranch-owner Bill Johnson, and the son of Porter's childhood playmate, Curt Engelhorn, donated much of the wealth necessary to buy the house, and to restore and operate it as Grime's vision of a writer's residence for visiting authors in Texas State's MFA program.

Historical detail of the now designated National Literary Landmark was replicated with care, and the "Katherine Anne Porter Literary Center" is currently open to the public for scheduled readings on Friday evenings.



KAPS Principal David Thomasson

Garrett.

"When are we ever going to use this?," is a complaint that no one resorts to at KAPS because the subjects are shown to be useful," Orion said. "We all want to go out into the world because of the stories and adventures teachers have shared."

The group says that the school has a stricter policy on drugs and violence than other schools — no warnings, no tolerance. The police are called at the first instance. This has made the KAPS a safe place, drugs and dropouts no longer an issue.

Following the school's Mission Statement: "Service to the Community", students are each required to perform 40 hours of community service, and have designed an after school program, themselves, offering tutorials, cooking, sewing, dance, speech, yoga, ping pong, chess, basketball, poker, comics, gardening, and job preparation — open to everyone.

"Any student from any campus can join these classes and see for themselves what it is like here," said Orion.

Due to this program, an \$800K grant was awarded to KAPS this spring by the 21st Century Community Learning Center. This fund will enable the after school activities to continue for another five years.

Other volunteer service examples that the students and staff lend a helping hand to are: Crisis Bread Basket, Keep Wimberley Beautiful, MLK Service Day, Lions Club Market Day volunteer park-

ing, Adopt a Highway, Deer Creek activities for residents, Texas Serve and Learn projects, San Marcos Sights & sounds, and Sewell Park Mosaics.

Proceeds from a successful KAPS RADIO benefit concert last year helped create an Internet station for Wimberley Valley, www.kapsradio.org. Anyone in the community is invited to submit ideas and announcements. KAPS teachers and club sponsors recognize that community service has become a vital component on graduates' competitive college and career resumes.

The school is largely run on donations and profits from benefit functions because state and local funding is less than non-charter schools. No enrollment tuition is charged.

Java Jive is the next KAPS fundraising event gearing up for November 13 at the Wimberley Lions Pavilion; a multi-talent festival, which includes music celebrities, artists, performers, and plenty of food.