



KARE scholarship winner Corrie Reese (front row, second from left) with KARE members, including (back row, from left) Elysce Garrison, Morene Leuders, Aubrey Garner, Betty Jean Mehmen, (front row) Betty Jo Watts, Brenda Ritter, and Jean Shilk

# Helping **KARE** for Katy Students

Katy Area Retired Educators give back to the community and reach out to future educators

*Written by Noreen Stavinoha | Photography by Jason Lehecka*

Between volunteering at local schools, mentoring students, hosting fundraising bake sales, and awarding scholarships, you'd never know the members of Katy Area Retired Educators (KARE) are actually retired. After dedicating many years to helping Katy students, group members enjoy the chance to give back to the community and connect with other former teachers. KARE President Betty Jo Watts wanted a way to stay involved in the field of education.

"I joined KARE, because it's a professional organization that keeps me informed on what the Legislature is doing regarding retired educators and because I hope my diligence will have a positive impact on future retirees," she shares.

## Reaching out to Katy ISD Retirees

One might think KARE is only for teachers, but it's open to

anyone who retires from Katy ISD. Ritter, who wrote the district newsletter while employed by Katy ISD, has seen the organization grow by leaps and bounds since its inception in 2002. When she joined KARE in 2004, there were 46 members, and now there are over 200. After joining KARE's parent organization, the Texas Retired Teachers Association (TRTA), Brenda Ritter learned about Katy's local chapter a year later and immediately decided to get involved. "I thought it would be interesting to keep up with what was going on with retirees," she shares.

Membership Chairman Betty Jean Mehmen invites any Katy ISD retirees interested in learning more to attend a KARE

Watts notes the work of TRTA state lobbyist Tim Lee, who keeps members well-informed of legislative changes, including those relating to their pension funds. "We have one of the best retirement systems in the country," says Watts. "We have to keep the base going, so that will continue." Along with Lee, KARE also invites others to share their knowledge about a variety of subjects during meetings. KARE members believe you should never stop learning.

### Connecting with the Community

The group offers several fun ways for members to stay active and involved in the community. KARE spotlights staying healthy and encourages members to keep journals of the number of miles they walk, run, and bike. They then share



meeting. "Our initial meeting last year was really well-attended," shares Mehmen, adding, "We're looking forward to another large turnout of new retirees."

### Learning About Legislative Changes

There is good reason for retirees to join KARE. The organization, along with TRTA, keeps its members abreast of proposed changes the Texas Legislature puts on its agenda and affords them the opportunity to respond. For instance, last year state legislators received so many responses from TRTA retirees, that they reversed a plan to increase healthcare premiums by 80%.

that information with state legislators to prove their desire to keep healthcare costs down.

With a passion for helping others, many KARE members volunteer their time at Katy ISD schools and around the community. They share their log of volunteer hours with state officials, so they can see just how much money has been saved through their efforts.

Many members mentor students who need a little extra help and an adult they can count on. These former teachers know it sometimes doesn't take much to help make a difference in a child's life. Often times, a friendly card game and some encouraging words of advice may be all a student needs to



get on the path to success. Some KARE members even help students as far away as a Hopi school in Arizona.

### Encouraging Future Educators

6KARE is also committed to helping students pursuing careers in education through scholarships. This past year, they became resourceful fundraisers, raffling off donated items and collecting their spare change in piggy banks. "In addition, we had a bake sale on Valentine's Day, where members bid on donated chocolate desserts, and at Thanksgiving, I baked pies for sale," shares KARE Treasurer Jean Shilk. The word among members is, those pies are highly prized and bring a good price!

In the end, they were able to award two \$1,000 scholarships to students pursuing careers in education. "Both of the students who won this year happened to have parents who work for the Katy school district, so that was kind of a bonus," shares Shilk, adding, "We would have chosen them anyway, but it was a way to give back." **KM**



*NOREEN STAVINOHA lives in Katy with her miniature schnauzer and loves to tell the stories of interesting people.*



## Join Kare

Learn about the organization's upcoming activities and meetings by visiting its website at [local.trtportal.org/profile\\_main.cfm?ID=266](http://local.trtportal.org/profile_main.cfm?ID=266). Member dues are \$35 per year.

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