

## Ag Center nutritionist enjoying new role

*By Debbie Glover  
St. Tammany News*

“I’ve wanted a job like this for 10 years,” said LSU Ag Center nutritionist Karen Walker.

Walker is the new expert teaching nutrition and the new My Plate nutrition plan that has replaced the old pyramid plan. Part of Walker’s job is to explain the new plan and its importance in everyday life.

“It’s important to be a role model, to live what you’re teaching,” she said. “Most of what I had done throughout my life has prepared me for this job. I have 10 years until my retirement, and I wanted my last job to be a fun and fulfilling one. I get to teach people, and this is very fulfilling.”

She addresses all age groups and particularly enjoys speaking to young children with the use of the Organ Wise Guys, a group of organs inside of two stuffed dolls. She takes the organs out of the dolls and explains their importance to the children and what the organs need in the way of nutrition to do their job properly.

Some of the organs include the Kidney Brothers, Hardy Heart, Pepto Stomach, Windy Lung and Sir Rebrum, the brain. Their appealing faces catch the youngsters’ attention and teach them about nutrition and their bodies at the same time.

For example, the Kidney Brothers, who are reminiscent of the Blues Brothers wearing sunglasses, remind kids they need eight glasses of water a day in order to function. Sir Rebrum tells kids they should wear a helmet to protect their brains if they play sports.

Aside from the Organ Wise Guys, regular books can be used to teach young students nutrition and the value of healthy snacks. “The Very Hungry Caterpillar” is read and then they talk about moving, munching and reading through My Plate. A butterfly can be made using a pretzel, raisins, cheese sticks for the antennae and a carrot.

“It’s important to include snacks from the five food groups,” said Walker, “including fruits, vegetables, grains, protein and dairy.”

Other tools that are used include the body walk, which has been used in the past, and the germ cave, new this year. Still in the creation stage, the germ cave is an all-black tent that will include black lights, which will highlight safety, sanitation and hand washing. The lights will be able to show how, through the use of phosphorous paints, germs are spread. Bubbles will also be used to show how airborne germs and bacteria are spread. The germ tent will be launching soon, said Walker.

She uses other resources to reach families on family nights at schools through the use of nutrition kits. Each kit has a topic, including exercise, snacking, breakfast and rethink your drink.

A dietician by training since 1983, Walker said the biggest problem is portion distortion. The My Plate program makes it much simpler to understand what size portions should be at each meal. Basically, half of each meal should be fruit and vegetables, with the other half proteins and grain.

Her first job was at Children’s Hospital in New Orleans. She dealt with a number of food and nutrition

problems, including diabetes, trying to get cancer patients to eat and finding foods that children could eat with the illnesses that were suffering from.

“There’s a lot to eating besides the food aspect,” she said. “There’s under eating, overeating, eating disorders, and a lot of nutrition problems to be considered in a hospital setting. Some are even psychological, not physical.”

“In South Louisiana we tend to live to eat instead of eat to live – it’s a cultural thing. Everything is tied to food,” said she. “What I want to teach is that each meal should be a social event at home with a family atmosphere of social eating, then exercising together and getting physical activity.”