

...sion this year of the county. Candidates can file online through a p.m. Friday and until 5 if they do it in person at the Snohomish County auditor's office in Everett. There are few associated with this, but not all, offices.

"Our local districts continue to need qualified, conscientious, enthusiastic people to serve as elected officials. I encourage voters to consider stepping up to run for local office," Snohomish County Auditor Carolyn Wetzel said.

While this is an off-year election with no contests for federal or statewide offices on the ballot, there's plenty at stake because decisions made this fall could reshape the leadership structure in many cities and the county as a whole.

Voters will be filling a majority of seats on the County Council and on city councils in Arlington, Bothell, Everett, Gold Bar, Granite Falls, Index, Lake Stevens, Marysville, Mill Creek, Monroe, Mountlake Terrace, Snohomish, Sultan and the town of Woodway.

And they'll also be electing mayors in the cities of Everett, Brierley, Gold Bar, Lynden, Monroe, Mukilteo, Snohomish and Starwood.

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Seven years ago Jan Link made a commitment to help 50 middle school students with a program that provided assistance outside of class. Each year in Washington, about 20,000 students drop out between freshman and senior year of high school.

Their Link to success

How one determined woman and an innovative program helped a group of middle-school students graduate, and even get to college, against tall odds

STORY BY ERIC STEVICK AND KARI BRAT • PHOTOS BY IAN THREK • THE HERALD

LYNNWOOD — Her absences were so long and frequent her middle school teachers wondered if she'd moved away.

They continued into high school, where a counselor suggested she consider transferring to an alternative school.

Alexis Martinson pressed on, fighting her self-doubts. Despite steep odds, she wanted to graduate with her peers at Lyndenwood High School.

From seventh grade through her senior year, Martinson missed 250 days of class, nearly a year and a half of instruction. There were hardships at home, doctor visits, severe abdominal pain and surgery, fatigue, sleep deprivation, a dying grandma in Olympia, a

man who was often ill, and a father who was not around. Many nights, court papers say, Martinson couldn't sleep because a sibling was getting high with friends inside the Lyndenwood apartment.

By her senior year, she was living in Monroe with her grandparents and getting a ride to Lyndenwood.

Through all the adversity, the teen knew she had someone in her corner, someone willing to help her in ways her mother could not, someone who could motivate her when she was too tired or discouraged to motivate herself, someone who could navigate the dysfunction.

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Michael Dish delivered his valedictorian speech at the Lyndenwood High School graduation ceremony in 2016. Dish is now a freshman at the University of Washington.

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friend.

"I knew this was her," she said. "It was her helping me."

Taylor Margulis made the Dean's List in his first quarter of college.

writing scholarship essays only to be rejected. Martin remembers meeting Link in elementary school. Right away, college was part of the conversation, though it was low on the list of priorities for a girl about to start middle school. Now, Martin's grateful.

"I am the first person in my family to go to college, so I am the guinea pig for my little sister," she said. "I have to figure things out."

Path

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"I don't think I could have graduated without Jan," Martinson said between bites of a grilled cheese sandwich at the Dushling Dutchman's Deli in Missoula.

Seated next to her was a woman four times her age. Jan Link had stopped by on a showery April afternoon during Martinson's lunch break from a nearby daycare center.

Over seven years, Link watched Martinson grow from a child into a young woman. She kept tabs on her up close and from afar, in person and online, determined to make sure she graduated from high school. She once stopped by her apartment to find the family wearing surgical masks because of mold. She helped get a brake job on the family car and groceries for a cooking class. She spent many hours on the phone talking with Martinson's mother,

sending how much she wanted her daughter to make it through school and in life.

In April 2016, two months before graduation, Alexis' mother died. Pamela Martinson was 48. Link spoke at the memorial service.

Alexis Martinson soldiered on. She didn't graduate with a pristine transcript, but she graduated.

"Most people would have folded but Alexis did not," said Link, a retired teacher and principal weary of a status quo that allows thousands of students to vanish from the state's high schools each year. "She is the best example of resiliency that I know. If Alexis can do this, all children can graduate no matter what ... if they have enough support."

And that's Link's mantra: Anyone can make it, given the right help after the school day ends.

For too many don't, however. She acclies the statistics: roughly 20,000 students across the state drop out between their freshman and senior years, and just

33 percent are expected to earn a college degree.

"Why is this so difficult when it is actually so easy?" she said. "Drives me crazy ... we keep losing more students and life just goes on."

Martinson was one of 20 seventh-graders entering Aberdeen Middle School in the fall of 2010 to come under Link's unrelenting watch, individually and as a group, they proved more than a ground experiment for her after-school program. In Link, 76, they were a gift, a chance to do something meaningful, even life-changing.

Of the 50, two students moved. Another died the summer before her senior year. The remaining 47 — 22 boys and 25 girls — graduated. Some parents doubt their children would have made it to commencement without the extra attention and they wish their older ones would have had the same opportunity.

Nearly all of the students in Link's group started college in the fall, including four who are in

mid-quarter, or whom he needs to turn his attention from playing saxophone to studying microeconomics. Instead, Guiton catches himself when he's slacking. He remembers when he doubted he could afford college, and Link told him that money and doubts should never stand in the way of his education.

Then he gets back to work.

colleges out of state and 18 others at the University of Washington in Seattle and Redwell.

At lunch on that drizzly April day, Link told Martinson she is proud of her.

The teen cast a sideways glance from her grilled cheese and root beer.

"Nobody would look after us like you did," she said. "You put your whole life into it."

Link picked up the check. They walked out into the rain-soaked parking lot and parted ways with Martinson knowing that Link is still watching.

Promising results

Link grew up in the 1940s and 50s reading Nancy Drew novels on a one-acre-ranch wheat farm on the Palouse. It had been home-stayed by her great-grandfather in the 1800s. Her father worked long hours tending the fields and tending the machinery; her mother was in the barn caring for the horses from morning to night. Link picked up their

work ethic and pragmatism.

She retired in 2000 after 36 years in public education. Seven years ago, she began in the fall of 1963 with three dozen first-graders at Mack-Twin Elementary in Pasco.

She was a principal at elementary and high schools in Oregon and Washington, her last stint in the Edmonds School District.

Her former superintendent, Brian Bennett, recalls two types of school leaders: those who were on fire and those who needed a fire lit beneath them. "Jan was on fire," he said. "And she hasn't slowed down."

Link opened a for-profit tutoring business in Kirkland within a year of retiring. She tutors there Saturdays. She also started a non-profit, Academic Link Outreach, to help students get through high school and enroll in college. For three years, she teamed up with Snohomish County Communities

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