

OZ

FROM A1

ous years. Peyton set her sights on landing the scarecrow role, and she

was thrilled to be chosen for the part.

Her mother, Tonia Westrich, is grateful that all three of her children got to experience the first-grade theatrical effort before Rudersdorf's retirement. The production teaches young children the value of hard work while also giving them early exposure to the performing arts, Westrich said.

"It gives these kids an opportunity to see 'I'm good at this,'" she said.

Rudersdorf began her teaching career in special education before switching to first grade at Bonduel Elementary School. To fulfill a curriculum requirement for teaching "presentation," she decided to produce a class play. After trying other shows, she settled on "The Wizard of Oz" and knew she had found something special.

She retooled the show into a concise 40-minute version of the musical fantasy, using an off-stage narrator to move the story along. A piano player guided cast members through all the favorite songs, while handmade costumes and sets added to the charm of the first-grade presentation.

Within a few years, the show became a favorite

among townsfolk, and the production was shifted to the Bonduel High School auditorium. Rudersdorf continued adding new features, such as making a costumed character out of the tornado that strikes Dorothy's farmhouse.

Crowds of 200 or more turned out for the annual performances, which consisted of a morning show for students and an afternoon show for the general public.

"Every year it just got to be bigger and bigger and bigger," Rudersdorf said.

When she decided to retire from teaching after the current school year, Rudersdorf found that no one else in the school district wanted to take over producing the "Wizard of Oz." So the curtain came down for good after last week's show.

Przybylski, who still remembers rehearsing with Rudersdorf in 1995 for her wicked witch performance, said she was grateful for the chance to join last week's reunion — and to acknowledge Rudersdorf's remarkable theatrical run.

"She was a fun teacher," Przybylski said. "She made sure we learned what we needed to. But she also made school fun."