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Democracy Dies in Darkness

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A teen died. Now his friends visit his grandma for breakfast each week.



About 30 friends show up for a homemade breakfast every Wednesday in memory of Sam Crowe, who was killed last year at age 15

By [Sydney Page](#)

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Peggy Winckowski, center, with many of the regular attendees of her weekly Wednesday Breakfast Club. Every Wednesday, Winckowski cooks breakfast for about 30 of her late grandson's friends. (Courtesy of Peggy Winckowski)



A breakfast club gathering in February. (Peggy Winckowski)

Peggy Winckowski's alarm goes off at 5 a.m. every Wednesday. It's time for her to make her famed pancake batter, fry up bacon and eggs, and chop fresh fruit. By 7 a.m., about 30 hungry teenagers arrive at her home in St. Louis, ready for breakfast. They have showed up every Wednesday of the school year since October 2021. "They all give me a hug as they come in," said Winckowski, 66. "They call me 'Grandma Peggy.'" The "Wednesday Breakfast Club" tradition came about after Sam Crowe — Winckowski's grandson — then a freshman at Bishop DuBourg High School, floated the idea to his friends. The school has a later start on Wednesday mornings, and Crowe and his classmates typically went to a diner to have breakfast before class. One Wednesday morning at the diner, Sam told his friends that his Grandma Peggy makes a better breakfast than the restaurant. So, after checking with his grandmother — who eagerly offered to host her grandson's friends for breakfast — a small group of high school students showed up at Winckowski's house the following Wednesday morning. And then every Wednesday since.

"Wednesday is my most favorite day of the week," said Winckowski. "I will feed them as long as they will come."

"They're going to be protected, they're going to be loved and they're definitely going to be fed," she added. The gathering took on a much bigger, and sadder, meaning in July 2022, when Sam was killed in a car crash at age 15.

"It was horrific," said Winckowski, who has 16 grandchildren, including Sam. "It was a phone call you never want to get."

On the day of Sam's death, a group of his closest friends — the same teens who always attended the weekly Wednesday breakfasts — congregated at Winckowski's house.

"We were all grieving with grandma," said Jeremy Roeder, 17, a junior at Bishop DuBourg High School, who became close friends with Sam during their freshman year. "She's basically family to all of us, and Sam was, too."

"They came here every day for the whole week," said Winckowski. "They just wanted to make sure that I was okay."



Winckowski with her grandson, Sam Crowe. (Family photo)



Sam's friends at a breakfast club gathering in April. The students enjoyed doughnuts that were donated by a local business.

As the summer came to an end and the first Wednesday of the school year approached, Winckowski told the teens they were still welcome for breakfast. More students than ever showed up.

"He would want us to continue so we're going to continue it," said Roeder. "We're all there for each other."

"To be 15 years old and to lose your best friend, it's got to be so hard for them to understand," said Winckowski. "There's not a day that goes by that we don't talk about Sam."

The tradition started with a few teenage boys and has expanded to include about 30 regular attendees — including sophomores, juniors and seniors. Sometimes, Sam's parents show up, as well as other members of the community.

Winckowski's home can get crowded, she said, but they make it work.

"It's just a tiny house, but it's got a lot of love in the walls," she said.

For Winckowski, the weekly gatherings make her feel close to her late grandson, who she said was "a gift from the get-go."

"He loved life, like his grandma," she said.

"He was the kindest person ever. He was so sweet and nice to everyone," said Maddie Ruggeri, 16, who started attending the weekly breakfasts after Sam's death. "He was always smiling."



Figure 1 The breakfast club group two months after Sam's death. (Peggy Winckowski)

For both the students and Winckowski, Wednesdays are a needed salve, and a time to process their shared grief.

"It feels like he's there with us," said Ruggeri. "It's something he enjoyed doing, and we're doing it for him so that we can continue his memory."

"For everyone who had the opportunity to know him and needs somewhere to grieve, it's a great place," echoed Cory Macke, 16, who has been attending the breakfast club since it started.

Macke said Winckowski is the reason so many students are willing to wake up early on Wednesdays.

"She is the kindest, most caring soul," said Macke. "She is very selfless. It's never about her."

Aaron Venneman, 17, a senior at Bishop DuBourg High School, said it's Winckowski who brings everyone together.

"She shows everyone great compassion," he said. For the first year, Winckowski covered all the costs associated with the breakfasts, but local businesses, families and parents of students have recently started pitching in for groceries — especially after the story was published last year in the [St. Louis Review](#).

"Some of the kids' grandparents have been trying to make donations so that we could keep it going," Winckowski said, adding that she and her husband — who has dementia and Parkinson's disease, and requires constant care — are on a fixed income.

Still, Winckowski is determined to carry on the breakfast club tradition, even if it means she has to pay entirely out of pocket.

"I have to keep moving because I have many more grandkids to take care of," said Winckowski, referring to the teens who attend her weekly breakfasts. "We'll never get over Sam's passing, but we can get through it together."

The weekly gatherings, she explained, keep her spirits high.



The breakfast club started with a few teenage boys, and has expanded to about 30 regular attendees. (Peggy Winckowski)



During warmer months, the breakfast club eats outside. (Peggy Winckowski)



Winckowski always changes up the menu, but her specialties are bacon and pancakes.

(Peggy Winckowski)

"Sam knew this was going to help his grandma get through this," she said.

Winckowski also hopes to set a positive example for the students.

"I hope they can pay it forward when they get older," she said. While Winckowski has specialty dishes — including pancakes and bacon — she also makes French toast (using her homemade bread), eggs in various forms, cinnamon buns, waffles and casseroles.

"I'm always looking for something new," she said, noting that on a recent Wednesday, she served "Grandma McMuffins" — her take on the classic McDonald's breakfast sandwich. She always makes more than enough food, "and if it's a little crowd, they take the leftovers to school," she said. "We don't let the food go to waste."

Aside from Wednesdays, some students stop by to visit Winckowski on other days, too. She keeps her kitchen stocked with soda and snacks.

"Being around her makes me feel cheerful," said Harrison Newcombe, 16, a close friend of Sam's, who visited Winckowski on a recent Saturday with several friends.

"It melts my heart every time they show up," Winckowski said.

"I've lost my 15-year-old grandson, but in his place, Sam gave me 30 extra grandbabies," she continued. "I think Sam is directing this from above."



Students stopped by Winckowski's house for a visit on a recent Saturday night. (Peggy Winckowski)