

# Olympian serves up Food for Thought

Pay issues, book policies simmer at heated meeting

By Misty Volaski

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Marla Runyan has overcome more than a few obstacles to become an inspiration on more than a few levels. Diagnosed with Stargard's disease 25 years ago, she is now legally blind.

But that didn't stop her from her dream: running in the Olympics for the United States. After years of training — she has some peripheral vision that allows her to see the track or road



Photo by Erik Taylor/Brooks Institute of Photography

**MARLA RUNYAN signs autographs at Meiners Oaks Elementary School.**

she's running on — she made the 2000 Olympic team and ran the 1,500-meter event in Sydney, Australia. She qualified once

again for last year's summer Olympics, participating in the 5,000-meter event in Athens, Greece.

Partly because of condition, she also studied to earn her master's degree in blind education, and is a speaker for both children and adults, as well as to veterans camps.

And Thursday, she volunteered for the Food for Thought program at Meiners Oaks Elementary School. Runyan's sister-in-law, Hamor, helped four school's healthy eating program and Runyan, down from Eugene, Ore., home town family in Ojai, jumped chance to help out.

"This is a great enthused Runyan, who

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## Runyan:

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Odesa is in first grade at Meiners Oaks. "We need to get kids thinking about what they are eating. I think we have a serious health problem in this country. Childhood obesity (rates) are rising; kids aren't getting enough exercise. Hopefully, this will show kids that there are healthy, intelligent food choices out there."

The program teaches kids to try new and health-conscious foods that many of them have not have been exposed to previously. Hamor and Runyan were on hand in the Meiners Oaks cafeteria Thursday afternoon, answering kids' questions and encouraging them to make good food choices. The kids seemed to respond well, filling their plates with the bright colors of many fruits and vegetables.

When the Food for Thought wagon comes through each week — full of fresh, locally-grown produce — the cafeteria staff does not offer a hot lunch option. They hope this prompts kids to eat a salad or a number of other low-fat items instead of, say, a slice of pepperoni pizza or a burrito.

The program, funded by the Ojai Unified School District, is also designed to show students that some things, like strawberries and other fruits available by season, are tasty

"Hopefully, kids will develop a taste for these foods and start requesting them at home."

— Marla Runyan



Photo by Erik Taylor/Brooks Institute of Photography

and satisfying while also being a good food choice.

"This really improves the quality of the cafeteria," said Hamor.

Runyan agreed. "We never had anything like this at my school. This is wonderful!"

The legacy of Runyan continues; she is expecting a daughter at the end of the year. Don't think her inspirational career is over, however, she is

already training for a chance at the 2008 Olympic running team.

"This is just one of the opportunities presented to me ... because of my running," enthused Runyan. "Hopefully kids will develop a taste for these foods and start requesting them at home. That would be a good step in the right direction."

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