



Spotlight

Cypress-Fairbanks Independent
School District

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Honoree	Article	Page
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Instructional Strategist

Duke, Jennifer	Discovery by Design.....	1
Landua, Vicki L.	Teach for Their Future.....	1

Creator of Student-centered Environment

Abitua, Shelly.....	Be the Lighthouse	3
Brown, Mary Jane.....	Setting the Stage.....	3
Campbell, Nina	From At-risk to Risk-taker.....	4
Cuculic, Sue	The Compass and the Scale	5
Cummings, Ellen	It's the Little Things	5
Gilbert, Richard.....	Robotics	5
Gossett, Heather	Sense of Wonder.....	6
Harper, Andrea	The Heart of Teaching.....	6
Horner, Glenda S.....	Dive In	7
Johnson, Patersa.....	Reach for the Stars	7
Kobal, Chris	Campfire, Chuckles, and a Circle of Friends	8
McLean, Holly	Teaching Is... ..	8
Myers, Patricia.....	In the Spotlight	9
Raia, Beth.....	Making a Difference, One Student at a Time.....	9
Reed, Corianne	A Family of Learning	10
Richardson, Cindy	They'll Never Forget How You Make Them Feel!.....	10
Russell, Katie.....	Creating a Classroom that Enables Success for All	11
Sanders, David J.	My Jump Into Education	11
Scofield, Pat	A Heartfelt Kiss.....	11
Skala, Shirley.....	How Do You Translate Love?.....	12
Staff, Diane.....	Welcome to Our Kindergarten Family	12
Vick, Carrie	Empowering Environment	13
Vines, Carolyn	Face Off.....	13
Wells, Lane.....	Flying Lessons	14
Wilkinson, Lisa.....	Student-centered Classroom.....	14
Wright, Sarah S.	She Made the Words Come Alive	15
Yeane, Frances	The Little Things.....	15

Positive Role Model

Brewer, Debbie.....	A Tribute to the Teachers in My Life.....	17
Chambers, Kathy.....	Hey, Hey!.....	17

Easton, Maryetta	You <i>Do</i> Reap What You Sow.....	18
Jackson, Jeffrey M.	Something Old, Something New	18
Leskey, Lynda	You Believed in Me	19
Marcotte, Merry	Lasting Impressions	19
Martin, Michelle	Good, Better, Best	20
Motsinger, Bobbe Lynn	Being an Art Teacher Means... ..	20
Robinson, Esther.....	A Grateful Heart	21
Robinson, Monica Carpenter .	Making a Difference	21
Spillman, Brenda.....	The Mustard Seed	22
Stewart, Lisa	Playing School	22
Trejo, Maria A.....	Recipe for an Exceptional Teacher with a Touch of Class.....	23
Villarreal, Elizabeth	Making a Difference	23
Widner, Susan.....	Common Threads of Values	24
Wong, Antonia M.....	Setting an Example.....	24
Yanowski, Brenda	It Is the Little Lessons That Count.....	25

Lifelong Learner

Bartley, Sheila	I've Come a Long Way.....	26
Gorsulowsky, Terri	Motivating Lifelong Learners.....	26
Grace, Kathy	How Did He Do It?	27
Holloway, Peggy	Metamorphosis	27
Koen, Bobbie	You <i>Can</i> Teach an Old Dog New Tricks!	28
McKinney, Kendall	A Teacher's Lesson	28
Meehan, Debbie.....	Becoming "Real"	29
Moreman, Kathleen.....	The Village People.....	29
Ocker, Marilyn	The Long Road Through Doubt and Discovery.....	30
Schoenvogel, Jessica	Earthworms and the Rain	31

Team Player

Andersohn, Debbie	It Takes a Team to Reach a Child.....	32
Bellomy, Gayle	Bloomin' Like a Rose	32
Govender, Naressa	Succeeding Together.....	33
Higgins, Carrie	Working Hand-in-hand Makes the Difference	33
Hughes, Jeanne	Sharing the Light.....	34
Sturgill, John Michael	"Never Volunteer" Not True at Holmsley	35

Online Version.....		36
Index by Campus		37

Auditioning for the Role

What does it mean to be an exemplary teacher? One definition can be found in the district's *Portrait of a CFISD Teacher*, which describes these characteristics.

- Instructional Strategist
- Creator of Student-centered Environment
- Positive Role Model
- Lifelong Learner
- Team Player

Shining the Spotlight

CFISD's annual Spotlight program, now in its 19th year, is the district's way of recognizing our classroom teachers who demonstrate these qualities day-in and day-out to make a difference in the lives of our students. Though each campus has a full cast and crew of star-quality performers, **Spotlight** allows each principal to select one teacher to be in the spotlight, center stage, so that we may honor that individual's performance.

Designing the Set

This publication is set up as an informal sharing of real-life stories. Sometimes, when our lives are bombarded by volumes of paper, information, reports, and other impersonal data, a personal story can have a powerful impact for reminding us that we are not dealing with statistics, but with human beings—children—and that each one is special.

Reading the Script

The narratives that follow were submitted by the 2004 **Spotlight** teachers, who were asked to choose one of the five dimensions of the Portrait and relate a personal “success story” from their experiences as a teacher or *because of* a teacher. The stories relate

- how the teachers developed these qualities in themselves or
- how these qualities observed in someone else provided personal or professional inspiration.

Some honorees recount childhood memories from their own days as students, while some describe pivotal moments in their careers involving especially memorable students, colleagues, or events. We hope you will be entertained and inspired by these insights from our teachers honored in this year's **Spotlight**.

Instructional Strategist

A CFISD teacher is an *instructional strategist* who thoughtfully designs learning and assessment activities which present the depth and breadth of content appropriate for students' age and aptitude and which promote students' actively thinking about the subject—the learners' engagement coming from personal connections, curiosity, challenge, and real-world applications.

Discovery by Design

Jennifer Duke K Holbrook Elementary School K Grade 3 K Math and Science

In twelfth grade, I didn't want to take Government and Economics. I couldn't fathom why my parents watched the news nightly, and any discussion of politics quickly sent me from the room.

Mr. Bob Wells was my government teacher. I almost felt sorry for him. How was he going to make us learn anything about this awful subject?

Day one was a simulation of a POW camp. After a few brief instructions, Mr. Wells left the room. We elected leaders and assigned jobs. We even declared one student guilty of food theft to avoid having everyone punished.

At the end, Mr. Wells announced that we had done a fantastic job setting up a government. I was astonished. How had I been tricked into participating in the political process?

Mr. Wells "tricked" me into doing quite a few things that year. For three days, I was a junior member of Congress, frustrated over my meager influence on the whole House. I ran a business, rented an apartment, and represented California at the Republican convention.

And I enjoyed every minute of it.

That is what Mr. Wells taught me. Presentation matters! I design lessons to "trick" my students into participating in class, especially the grumblers. The many "oohs" and "ahhs" during their discoveries are my reward.

I know the majority of my students won't major in math or science. I didn't major in political science.

But I do watch the news every night, Mr. Wells.

Teach for Their Future

Vicki L. Landua K Goodson Middle School K Grades 6-7-8 K Technology Coach

"Teach students for their future,
not our past."

—Arthur C. Clarke

This quote, from an early technology coaches' meeting, is one of my favorites. I entered education after working in business for 12 years, and I believe that technology definitely impacts student learning and assists students in learning

in a way that is motivating, creative, empowering and fun.

My position is a unique one. I have the privilege of touching the lives of every student in the building, and there is nothing more rewarding than watching students have an "Aha!" moment. Whether they are discovering how formulas in Excel make math calculations easier or figuring

out how to format text-boxes and graphics, I am amazed at how successful students are when actively engaged in the learning process using technology.

I am constantly reassured that technology integration is valuable in student learning. Just recently, our sixth-grade reading students completed an Internet scavenger hunt to collect background knowledge on Chinatown and the author Lawrence Yep. After the students completed the lesson, Ms. V. told me that one of her students, A., thought the lesson was “really cool!”

A’s parents were born in China, and she had visited China in 2001 and had actually gone to

Chinatown over spring break. I visited with A. and she told me how much she had enjoyed the activity because it helped her to discover even more about her Chinese culture and the places she had visited. She told me, “It is so neat that my classmates get to experience Chinatown as well.”

My role of technology coach has given me the most memorable rewards of my 11 years in education. I am fortunate to work with an incredible staff who believes in doing what is best for students. Working together as a team, we are challenging and moving our students successfully into the 21st century.

Creator of Student-centered Environment

A CFISD teacher is a *creator of a student-centered environment* who provides a caring, supportive classroom in which students are workers and doers, comfortable in taking risks to further their learning.

Be the Lighthouse

Shelly Abitua K Windfern High School K English IV, Teen Leadership, and Credit-By-Exam

A lighthouse with the words “Lighting the way, one student at a time” displays our motto at Windfern High School. Just as a lighthouse guides a ship, I feel it is my role in the classroom to guide students towards success.

“Education is not filling a bucket, but lighting a fire.”

—William Yeats

Inspired by the student-centered environment in my classroom, my students are workers, doers and problem solvers. Whether they are creating a PowerPoint presentation or researching to write a paper, they are the ones doing the work and solving the problems. Sometimes one will get frustrated and exclaim, “I’m lost!” It is my privilege to guide him or her to success.

The other day, a student of mine was working on a PowerPoint presentation. He asked me how to insert a voice-over. He said he learned how to do it in BCIS class but couldn’t remember. Instead of being intimidated because I didn’t know the answer, I told him honestly that I didn’t know, but, if he figured it out, to show me. A few minutes later, he figured it out and proudly showed me. He became the teacher in the

classroom. I learn something new every day from my students.

In my classroom, real-world applications are a must. Most of my students are potential dropouts. They must see the connection between class activities and the “real world,” or they become discouraged and give up.

My classroom is a caring, supportive environment where I am the facilitator, and all are comfortable taking risks to further their learning. I have been stressing about writing this essay. One of my students noticed, put her arm around my shoulders and softly said, “It’ll be okay, Mrs. Abitua.”

I explained, “It’s so difficult to convey in a one-page essay how much I love my job and what it means to me.” She responded, “That’s okay, we know how much you care about us, and that’s what is important.” I agree; that’s what is important. My students know I care about them. Nothing reaffirms this more than when a student thanks me personally in a graduation speech for helping him or her to succeed.

It is so absolutely true what my principal wrote about me for this award. I am often heard saying, “I can’t imagine teaching anywhere else.”

Setting the Stage

Mary Jane Brown K Hairgrove Elementary School K Pre-kindergarten K ESL

The vest may sport a number of zippers for letter Z. The jumper may have five to seven nursery rhymes painted on it to review the newly-acquired nursery rhymes in Pre-k. The nests in spring are real, from birds long gone. Little hands and eyes are busy absorbing, as well as bodies marching and clapping around the room to a new chant or song. Minutes for learning are precious, whether walking in line or waiting for others to complete bathroom privileges. We read small, one- to two-sentence books, many almost worn out from little eyes poring over them.

All students wear crowns. The “jewels” on the crowns are given for reading quietly to a buddy or a teacher in the hallway after bathroom time. “Jewels” are stickers that are given for positive choices in reading quietly, being kind to others, and making good choices in behavior. On days when students are finding it difficult to make good choices, we may take off our crowns and review how we got so many jewels. Often just looking at the many successes sends a positive message—“I make good choices a lot!”

Also, we can solve problems together by brainstorming what has previously worked or how other students chose to behave or solve the situation at hand. It helps that I look for the

jewels (children) that are sparkling as we walk along.

Another incentive to set the stage for learning and setting the stage for a supportive environment is the Buddy Time with our third-grade classes. My Pre-k ESL classes need a lot of exposure to language modeling. The third graders are directed to read the pictures and use their fingers to move left-to-right as they read print to their buddies. We also write stories together. We count and stamp amounts in Kid Pic computer programs, learn the name of equipment, and write words on the computer. The Pre-k students love to get to see their buddies for 30 minutes each Friday. They encourage each other to do their best, and they do for their buddy. I recently walked along the hallway, and a fourth grader, a buddy last year, said, “I wish I was in third grade again, so I could have a buddy again!” “Kids supporting kids” is such a special incentive program.

It is still fun to set the stage, even after 27 years. It is a joyful responsibility to see another child fly off to kindergarten with confidence and excitement at the end of the year and also to see them smiling proudly, quietly displaying fingers signing, “I love you!”

From At-risk to Risk-taker

Nina Campbell K Lieder Elementary School K At-risk Specialist K Dyslexia

It was purely by accident that my student teaching assignment was at an at-risk school. I was also unaware, when recruited by HISD from Northern Arizona University, that my first teaching assignment was for an even more at-risk school. After two years in HISD, I interviewed with Cy-Fair and was offered a teaching position—again, the school was at-risk. But this time I chose the position.

During my early years of teaching, I discovered that teaching students who were at-risk was my passion. These students needed

someone not only to teach them the curriculum but, more importantly, to believe in them. They needed someone who would take them beyond the limits of language, economics, or even disabilities.

A large part of my job is to help my students discover their strengths. Once children develop confidence, they can begin to overcome the obstacles that may be inhibiting their achievement in school. This requires personal attention and motivation. I spend time listening to what they say, discovering how they learn,

and teaching them how to think. Getting to know my students individually creates an environment in which they will be more likely to take the risks necessary to grow as learners.

My goal is not only for them to have a successful elementary school experience, but also for them to use the tools I've given them to continue to take risks in pursuing their dreams.

The Compass and the Scale

Sue Cuculic K Frazier Elementary School K Grades 1-5 K
Special Education / Resource

In my Resource classroom, my students hold the compass for our travels through their learning. Our course is established by setting our sights on their many varied and similar goals. As in the general education classrooms, these students have varying ability levels, but these variations represent a much broader range from low to high.

The students' emotional needs must come first because they are children and because they are different from their peers. As the old saying goes, "Students don't care what you know as much as they know that you care." Included in their emotional needs is the need for structure and well-defined boundaries, which I try to provide on a consistent basis. Due, in part, to their disabilities and to their emotional

intelligences, we have many visual supports for both skill practice and daily schedules.

Once our relationship is set and the classroom structure is established, I attempt to hold the balance—the scale—steady between individual needs and classroom teamwork. With previous experience in teaching children with autism and with all of the training I've participated in, both in Cy-Fair and many other venues, and with all that my students have taught me, I try to maintain that balance.

My students have really come a long way this year, and I am so very proud of them. I will continue to work on my own education, as needed for me and my students, as long as I have the ability to make a positive difference in the lives of children.

It's the Little Things

Ellen Cummings K Emmott Elementary School K Grade 3 K
Gifted & Talented

There is only one reason I chose to be a teacher. If it weren't for the spontaneity and innocence of the children, I wouldn't be in this profession. I am constantly creating an atmosphere in my classroom that allows for active learning and student-driven investigations to take place. I want their curiosity and interests to be part of the driving force behind why they choose to learn and succeed.

The only way my students can be willing to take a leap of faith in their learning is by my making personal connections with them and letting them see the true me. Once they trust me, they will allow me into their world and know that I am not here to judge.

Getting moments of validation as to why we chose to take this path as teachers sometimes sneaks up on us when we're least expecting it. One of those moments sneaked up on me this school year. When a child in my classroom had to endure a family crisis at home, I, without thinking, immediately jumped in and took on a motherly role along with my teacher role.

After months of all types of communication with the family, I received an unexpected letter of gratitude and appreciation that helped me bring things into perspective. When parents know that I am educating their cherished gifts as if they were my own, that's when I know this is what I was always meant to do. What greater honor can there be?

Robotics

Richard Gilbert K Cypress Falls High School K Industrial
Technology

In 1986, as I was watching Channel 8, a program came on that showcased the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. These college students were designing and building tethered robots in their Engineering class. The students were introduced to the robotic field, and then each team was issued an identical kit of materials with a time frame for completion. Students were then randomly selected to compete against opposing robots.

As I watched, I thought, "My students can do this—learn about the engineering process and enjoy the competition." Now, 18 years later, we end the school year with a robotics unit that M.I.T. would be jealous to have. It is the highlight of the year and takes all the skills and design capabilities that the students have gained during the year.

On April 15th, 2004, my students received their identical kits of materials, and we revealed the course for the year. In years past we have had Mr. Berry, Mr. Brautigam, and many other district and campus leaders come to observe as I reveal this exciting unit and to watch as the students instantly start to formulate robotic vehicles to solve the problem (and possibly inflict damage to the opposing team's robot).

All 25 years of my teaching career have been in Cypress-Fairbanks I.S.D. I graduated from Cy-Fair High School, and I student-taught at Jersey Village High School. It is a blessing and an honor to be recommended as the Spotlight teacher for Cypress Falls High School, but it is a joy to my heart to have my time protected, my ideas respected, and my students truly interested in an exciting course of study.

Sense of Wonder

Heather Gossett K Birkes Elementary School K Kindergarten

When you are five years old, you are confident that you are the center of universe. This encourages the perfect environment where I model the student-centered classroom. I base my teaching agenda and purpose around the talented author Rachel Carson.

Her work, *The Sense of Wonder*, inspires me to meet the needs of each child, allowing the individual to excel to his or her highest level of academic achievement. Carson states, "If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in."

I hope to be that adult or one of the adults who is fortunate enough to maintain a sense of wonder each day in the classroom. Meeting 21 kindergarteners' needs proves to be challenging, exciting, meaningful, and, most of all, rewarding. I strive to see all learning through a child's natural sense of wonder, no matter what the subject. I feel I have achieved a student-centered environment when my children feel free to question, free to explore, and eager to discover the mysteries and joys of learning.

A child's sense of wonder drives my passion to teach.

Carson, R. (1956). *The Sense of Wonder*. New York: Harper & Row

The Heart of Teaching

Andrea Harper K Kirk Elementary School K Grade 5 K Language
Arts and Social Studies

As a sixth-year teacher, I find it extremely motivating to reflect back on my journey as an educator. Although my initial dreams did not include becoming a teacher, I quickly realized that teaching is where my heart is. Each and every day, I consider myself lucky to be able to take part in this adventure for our children.

One specific event that has allowed me to demonstrate my ability to create a student-centered environment involves my principal's decision to target one of our student populations that was under-performing and unmotivated. This change came late in the year and has certainly been a challenge.

My job is not only to develop a new love for reading in these students, but also to build motivation and self-confidence so that they will

perform to the best of their ability. This is done through creating a safe and exciting environment for learning, as well as building the trust necessary for each student to be successful. I have seen great improvements in the students' grades, attitudes, and motivation. For example, A., who was unmotivated, unsuccessful, and not a believer in education, is now excited about learning. He is performing not only for me, but for himself.

As a teacher, I have had the opportunity to work with a variety of student populations, cultures, and ability levels. I get to see these children develop and grow through the learning experiences that I create, and, for these reasons, my heart is in teaching.

Dive In

Glenda S. Horner K Truitt Middle School K Grades 7 and 8 K
Speech and Theatre Arts

The summer of my first-grade year, I flunked beginning swimming twice! I could not master the final test, which was to swim the length of the pool. I would swim halfway across the pool, and panic would set in. I never did master swimming, but, through some unconventional coaching, I did conquer the diving board.

I was small and timid as a child, but, hard as I tried to fade into the background, my bright-red hair would tell on me. As I stood in line to jump off the board, I continued to weave backward, toward the end of the line. My goal was to completely avoid the humiliation of failing yet another swimming-related task.

Despite my efforts, I felt a pair of hands lift me from behind. These hands carried me to the front of the line and placed me at the edge of the board. Then, I felt a gentle nudge. I had no choice but to land in the aqua-blue water.

I went down screaming, but, as I began my return to the surface, something overcame me. I could not help it—a smile emerged. I had a blast! I scurried up the side of the pool and pushed past everyone to make my way to the front. I jumped off the board again and again without assistance.

I love sharing this experience with my students because performing and speaking in front of an audience is like jumping off a diving board. Some will gladly jump, while others need a gentle nudge. Experience has taught me that, if the teacher has established a nurturing environment, students are more apt to take risks. I am quick to point out that I will never ask them to do anything that I would not be willing to do myself. They know that I'm even willing to dive in with them if that's what it takes.

Reach for the Stars

Patersa Johnson K Lamkin Elementary School K Grade 1 K ESL

My role as an educator is to facilitate my students' learning and positive attitudes. I take great pride in observing the determined smiles on their faces when my students stretch to reach their highest potential. After each day as my

papers are graded, the area is picked up, and tomorrow's lessons are ready, I reflect on the success of the day. I ask myself the same question every day, "Did I challenge, motivate and inspire my students?" As my mind's eye

sweeps across the room remembering each child's face, where each student sits, the questions asked, and the work done, I can honestly answer myself, "Yes!"

I believe in having the highest expectations for my students because I see these high expectations met every day and every year. My continued love of teaching does not come from any one person, workshop, program, or class. It comes from the success of my students, the respect for and the relationship I have with my students' parents, and the belief that a child's success comes from the parent and teacher working together. My yearly goal for myself is that I inspire, motivate, and challenge my students.

The ultimate goal of any successful teacher is to create a supportive learning environment where students can thrive. This is the only kind of environment where students are encouraged to take risks. I teach them that errors are permissible and that we sometimes learn best from our mistakes. My definition of a thriving student is one who is self-confident, well-rounded, creative, and positive.

Finally, I would like to finish with a quote I strive to live by:

"Few things help an individual more than to place responsibility upon him, and to let him know that you trust him."

—Booker T. Washington

Campfire, Chuckles, and a Circle of Friends

Chris Kobal K Cy-Fair High School K Teen Leadership K PALs

If you are lucky enough to survive the crowds and the seemingly endless miles of hallway, you may just end up at Portable 8, affectionately known as the Port-A-Pal. For the past three years, I have had the privilege of coordinating and implementing the activities related to PALs, a program dedicated to empowering young people to make a positive difference in their school and their community.

However, Cy-Fair PALs is different from your average leadership program. When you enter the room, you will see that what appears to be a classroom has been transformed into an environment conducive to our mission. You will find just about anything and everything from lava lamps to a colored "disco" floor that could rival the set of an *Austin Powers* movie. I believe this setting has created the unity found in the program here at Cy-Fair.

The students, not sitting in traditional desks, find themselves vying for position on the various couches encircling the room. With this seating arrangement, students are engaged in all activities and are encouraged to participate, whether listening to a story from another student or offering a few words of advice to other PALs, and, on occasion, to me.

This unique arrangement has created a student-centered environment. In being recognized as a Spotlight teacher, I am honored to showcase this room. Though it may not be practical for a "regular" class, I have found this setting to create a perfect balance between work and play.

If you are ever in the area and have survived the halls, please stop by.

Teaching Is...

Holly McLean K Arnold Middle School K Special Education

What makes teaching an exceptional career choice is having a student get his test back and seeing his face light up from the unfamiliar feeling of success. Teaching is joyful when your students give you "high-fives" down the hall or

holler your name to say hello. Teaching is rewarding when students want to share what they've made in tech. that day or what they drew in art.

Teaching is sacred when students come to you for your opinion on matters that have a dramatic effect on their lives. Teaching is intense when you have challenged a person to dig deep into his soul for solutions he never knew existed. Teaching is exciting when you talk a student through the steps of writing a composition, and he puts them together on paper. Teaching is fulfilling when you have helped a student find his coping skills to be successful.

Teaching is invigorating when you grasp that teachable moment, and suddenly the child "gets it." Teaching is momentous when that at-risk student tells you he never liked reading until he was in your class. Teaching is glorious when you can connect the students' learning to life and answer that question, "Why do I have to do this?" Teaching is inspiring when you learn from the very ones you are teaching.

All of these things are routine in my days at work. Teaching is challenging, but, for the very reasons listed above, I love my job. I have taught for two years now after transferring from the business world to education, and I have never felt more productive.

The kids who come through our classes are our future. I was taught the quote by M.B. "Flip" Flippen recently in the Capturing Kids' Hearts program, though I think that I've always known the meaning: "If you have a child's heart, you have his head." I carry this philosophy as I encounter new students and face new challenges. Teaching is what you make it to be and, thanks to a wonderful administration, a great team of co-workers, and an outstanding group of students, I have found teaching to be a fulfilling passion.

In the Spotlight

Patricia Myers K Owens Elementary School K Music

The last thing I ever wanted to be was a teacher. I was going to inspire the world with my "musical talent." I wanted to be center stage, in the spotlight and famous!

While I was teaching an after-school music program for at-risk, inner-city children, those college plans changed completely. I'll never forget the young girl who cynically said at the end of my first day, "I'll bet you don't come back next week." But, in fact, I did go back. Those students ignited a fire in me for teaching that, to this day, has never gone out.

Throughout the years, I have taught children from many different backgrounds and experiences. My job is to create a classroom that welcomes all of them. I want music to be their favorite class—a place where they can play, sing, and create music in a variety of ways. But,

more importantly, I want to foster an environment that builds self-esteem, trust and good character.

I was fortunate to meet and train with M.B. "Flip" Flippen at the Capturing Kids' Hearts course last summer. What I learned from him changed my life and my approach to teaching. He believes that "if you have a child's heart, you have his head." When children feel safe, valued, and empowered, they will rise to the task, whether it is music, math, or life in general.

Ironically, my career turned out just the way I planned. I am "center stage" and in the "spotlight" every time I get up in front of my students. As far as being famous...I never dreamed that, when I'd walk through the grocery store, the airport, or even Reliant Stadium, some child would yell, "Look, Mom, there's my music teacher!"

Making a Difference, One Student at a Time

Beth Raia K Robison Elementary School K Grade 1

I am a graduate of Texas A&M University and have taught in Cypress-Fairbanks for the past 17

years. I come from a family of educators. My great-grandmother taught in a one-room

schoolhouse. My grandfather was a superintendent, and my mother is a librarian. I “played school” as a little girl and always knew I wanted to become a teacher.

My teaching career started at Holmsley Elementary, where I taught first grade. I taught at Metcalf Elementary and came to Robison in 2003. I have been teaching GT for four years.

My greatest satisfaction in teaching comes when I can help a student succeed. A student entered my classroom with good grades from another district; however, he was unable to perform up to the Cy-Fair standards. I began working with him individually every day, concentrating on guided reading.

I communicated with his parents, urging them to become involved in his schoolwork. With the help of leveled readers, Reading Recovery, and tutoring, he was reading on grade level by the end of the year. As his reading improved, so did his self-confidence, and he began to enjoy school. He was ready for second grade!

Teaching first grade has been very satisfying because many students who enter my classes with limited reading skills are, by the end of the year, reading fluently. When students come back to visit me, I am proud to have been their teacher.

A Family of Learning

Corianne Reed K Jowell Elementary School K Grade 2 K ESL-Co-teach K Language Arts/Reading

Have you ever felt unprepared for the challenge teaching brings? When I graduated from the University of Maine in 1993, I wasn't a confident graduate like my colleagues. They knew exactly what they wanted to do once they got into their classrooms...I, on the other hand, had no idea. But, even though I lacked the confidence about what to teach and how to do it, I always knew my first goal in the classroom. It was to build children's self-esteem and to cultivate positive feelings toward learning.

Each day I think about how I'm going to reach each child—not just in academics, but in a personal way. Building relationships is what matters in creating a classroom where every child succeeds.

I want my love for learning to be contagious. When I'm excited about something, I want my students to be excited also. I try to immerse

them in what we are studying through poetry, songs, and other genres.

Since the beginning of the year, we have embarked upon a journey—the writing process. At first we hit rough waters, but as we traveled further, the water smoothed out as the whitecaps decreased. The students now love to write. One day, during guided reading, I looked up and saw every student in the writing center. They were writing a song for me. It melted my heart. Now students are excited to bring writing creations from home, and we celebrate them as a class.

So, as the years go by, I learn new things, try new things, and change things that already exist in order to improve my classroom environment. One thing that has stayed constant is my belief in the importance of making every child feel loved and special because, as my wise friends say, “If you can get your kids to love you, they will work for you!”

They'll Never Forget How You Make Them Feel!

Cindy Richardson K Yeager Elementary School K Grade 3 K Structured English Immersion

A couple of years ago, I received a letter in the mail. I was eager to open it because I didn't

recognize the return address or the name of the person who had written the letter. As I opened

the letter, a picture fell out. It was a picture of a beautiful young family. I was even more perplexed because I didn't even recognize anyone in the picture. As I began reading the letter, I realized that it was a student whom I had taught 15 years previously, when I was a first-year teacher in Utah. I didn't recognize the name because she had since married and started a family of her own.

The letter began, "Mrs. Richardson, I can't believe that I finally found you!" She explained that she had tried to track me down for many years and finally found someone who knew where I had moved. In the letter, she reminisced about many of the things that we had done in class, both planned activities and funny moments that we had shared as a class that year. I had forgotten many of the funny stories, and I was amazed at all of the details that she recalled about our little third-grade classroom.

At the end of the letter, she wrote something that I will never forget: "I don't remember everything that we did in your classroom, but I'll always remember how you made me feel." What a profound statement. I was reminded again about how important our calling is as teachers. We can have the best lesson plans, well-prepared activities, and the most organized classroom in the school, but our students will not remember any of these things if we didn't make them feel important and good about themselves.

I will always be grateful for the lesson that I was taught through this experience. When the years go by and these children that we now teach grow into young adults, they may not remember all of the "cool" things that we do in the classroom or all of the "important" concepts that they need to be taught, but they will never forget how we made them feel.

Creating a Classroom that Enables Success for All

Katie Russell K Matzke Elementary School K Kindergarten

Several years ago, I began to research how to differentiate my classroom according to the individual needs of each of my students. In my class, I teach in small groups of children according to their individual learning style and academic level. I have found that working with my students as individuals or in small groups builds their confidence and self-esteem. While I'm working in small groups, other students are learning and creating in various workstations.

After reading several books, I felt I needed additional manipulatives, games, and resources that would allow me to implement a differentiated classroom. My Instructional Specialist, Milrose Gallun, encouraged me to write grants, and, in three years, I have received several grants awarded by various businesses.

The grants have allowed me to acquire the necessary resources to create a differentiated classroom to meet my students' needs. I now have more resources to plan for and meet each child's individual needs and to promote success through activities that provide them with purposeful and meaningful learning experiences. Through the use of multi-leveled, hands-on activities, children are given opportunities to explore, create, manipulate, make decisions, and challenge themselves to use higher-level thinking while reinforcing skills already taught in class.

Giving students an opportunity to be successful, both working with me and by themselves, moves them toward having the confidence in taking more challenges and becoming lifelong learners.

My Jump into Education

David J. Sanders K Metcalf Elementary School K Grade 4 K
Math and Science

My 21 years as a United States Army paratrooper helped me prepare for my jump into

the classroom. Although the educational landing zone was not a familiar one, I soon found that

making personal connections was the key to survival in both the military and the classroom. I have always tried to empower others to solve problems while encouraging risk-taking. In my three years in the classroom, I have promoted risk-taking by establishing a caring environment where everyone's opinions and views are wanted and appreciated.

I believe our children should gain problem-solving skills through hands-on activities. These types of activities require great cooperation among students. To build an atmosphere of

cooperation in my classroom, I attempt to make a personal connection to each child. These connections help create a comfortable environment for all students. Although the process of making connections has required that I share my personal life, that sharing has enabled me to establish a classroom with mutual care and respect.

My goal is to motivate our children as doers and problem-solvers, which will prepare them for the jumps in their lives and will ready them for any landing zone.

A Heartfelt Kiss

Pat Scofield K Wilson Elementary School K Grade 4 K
Language Arts & Math

I believe that students learn best in a caring, supportive environment where they feel comfortable in taking risks. Creating that atmosphere has always been my personal goal. I try to listen sympathetically to students' problems and encourage them to do their best always.

As I reflected on my teaching career, I recalled one memory that holds a special place in my heart. I remembered a new student who struggled with reading and lacked confidence in her ability. Moving to Wilson was to be a new beginning for her. She hoped to overcome her troubled family life, attend school regularly, and become a successful student. We worked very hard, and slowly she improved.

On the day of the TAAS test, I walked through my classroom hoping that my students were prepared and ready for the test. Moments before the testing began, I passed by M. As I looked into her eyes, I saw only fear. Without thinking, I leaned over, kissed her on the forehead, and whispered, "You can do it." She gazed up at me and gave me a weak grin.

The next week, tears came to my eyes when I read in her journal how afraid she had been on the day of the test but how calm and confident she felt after I gave her that "special kiss." Because of that one gesture, she wrote, "I knew I could do it, and I wasn't afraid anymore."

One heartfelt kiss boosted M's confidence and helped her to achieve a passing grade on the TAAS test.

How Do You Translate Love?

Shirley Skala K Hamilton Middle School K Grades 6, 7, and 8
Reading K Grade 6 Language Arts

I am a teacher. My job description states that I am to teach middle school students to read. I am to accomplish this task by teaching the students how to analyze words, use context clues, read fluently, summarize, draw conclusions, distinguish fact from opinion, and the list goes on. Nowhere in this list is the heart and soul of reading—teach them to love to read.

I don't know of a single individual who would, on a rainy day, curl up in front of a fire with a good book to distinguish fact from opinion. If we

don't allow our students the opportunity to love the language, experience the thrill of the chase, cry with the victim, and root for the hero, they will never choose reading over watching.

Reading is much more difficult than watching. There is no remote, no *TV Guide*, no instant gratification. You have to seek out a book, know authors, and put forth effort.

So, how do you teach children to love to read? You must be passionate about what you read in class and demonstrate that passion to

your students. You must read aloud with enthusiasm, give book talks, and have an extensive classroom library. You must be willing to put a book into a student's hand with no thought about whether you will ever get it back.

You must read juvenile literature every spare moment of your life so you will know what book needs to go into whose hands.

Now, why isn't that in the curriculum guide?

Welcome to Our Kindergarten Family

Diane Staff K Farney Elementary School K Kindergarten

Each year, as the first day of school approaches, I begin to wonder about the "new family" that will be coming to my classroom. They are the excited, slightly nervous boys and girls and their parents who become my second family for that school year. My philosophy of school centers on repeated practice sessions for "life" without all the serious consequences attached. I want my class to know that we are here to help each other, learn from each other, and be friends to everyone. I want to instill in each of them the love of learning, the belief that they can be whatever they choose, and the ideal that hard work can accomplish great things.

We change seats once a month, moving to different table groups so that we can practice learning to get along with a variety of people. We work in groups for literacy centers as if we were working on a project in an office. Interpersonal skills are paramount, so we practice looking at the person we are speaking to, being a good listener, and using kind words. Requests should always begin with "please," and hearing "thank you" will bring a smile from even the grouchiest person.

As we write and draw in our journals, we become authors and illustrators. As we explore sorting, patterning, and addition, we become

mathematicians. New scientists are born when we do experiments related to our themes. Throughout all these experiences, we celebrate each accomplishment. We often make mistakes, but the lesson learned is that there is nothing that can't be fixed with a little creative thinking.

It is in the spring of each year that I begin to hear and see the results of all our family-building endeavors. I hear children "teaching" each other a difficult concept. I see my class cheer for the one child who has finally made it to the top of the sight-word ladder; they are genuinely thrilled for him. I hear them thinking out loud, connecting the dots of a new skill by using previously learned concepts. I see their eyes light up when I read a journal passage aloud, and it really says what the student heard in his head because he sounded out each word so carefully.

I will cry on the last day of school because I will truly miss each and every heart and face... they are my second family, and I am honored to be a small part of each of their lives. I hope they will look back in 10 or even 20 years and remember with great pride all the friends, successes, and learning that took place in our kindergarten family and the teacher who loved them for all they were then and all that she knew they were destined to become.

Empowering Environment

Carrie Vick K Tipps Elementary School K Kindergarten (ESL and Gifted & Talented)

As my students enter the classroom for the very first time, they see me, and I see their potential. They ask, "Are you my teacher?" I reply, "Yes, my name is Mrs. Carrie Vick, and I teach kindergarten here at Tipps Elementary."

Every day is a learning experience for my students and me. I make sure that each child has a voice. For that to happen, I create a

student-centered environment. We develop five positive rules that we all sign to show ownership. They are referred to as reminders of our connection to the class and our dedication to working toward our goals. We agree that edifying each other is a necessity for achievement.

At the beginning of each lesson, I tap into their prior knowledge and connect the learning to their

lives. The students become doers who are active in the learning process. I use a variety of teaching techniques to reach all learning styles. Workstations provide many activities, so students can work at their own pace, at their own levels, and in their own areas of interest. I also acquire a different animal every other week, which enhances students' learning as they observe the visitor, feed it, and clean up after it. I feel it is

important that students have an opportunity to share what they have learned and to teach others their new skills.

If you were to visit our classroom, you would find a class learning and exploring together. Encouraging curiosity is one of the best ways to quench the thirst of learning. It is my choice to make each moment count.

Face Off

Carolyn Vines K Jersey Village High School K English I & II

His name is "Roberto." He is 17 years old, and he has earned seven credits in three years of high school. Last August, he walked into my English II SSL class ready to wage war as he calmly told me, "I hate to write, and I ain't gonna read, neither."

Well, at least I knew where I stood!

I went to work, at first talking to him, making sure I acknowledged his presence in class, finding out what he liked—the Astros, the Rockets, cars. I also told him that he was not going to get kicked out of my class—he was going to stay, no matter what, so we might as well get along. He was okay with that agreement, since his *modus operandi* was to be so disruptive that he would get kicked out—no class, no work.

With our relationship established, we could now get down to work. He is a few years behind,

but every day I see some spark in him: he contributes to class discussion, he writes in his journal, and he even volunteers to read every so often.

Whenever I meet the "Robertos" of this world (and there are many of them), I remember these lines from a favorite poem:

"I would like to build a bridge across the abyss
That separates you from me, unknown from
known, subject from object, stranger from
stranger.

I would like to build a bridge with meaningful
words...

So, you, too, can build between yourself and the
world

A sturdy bridge that leads away from isolation..."

—Robert Zimmer
from "To My Future Students"

Flying Lessons

Lane Wells K Fiest Elementary School K Grades 3-4-5 K
Special Education / Resource and Co-teach

There are times that one may stumble across something that has great meaning to him/her. It may be a song, or a painting, maybe an article, a book, speech, or sermon. For me, it was this poem:

Come to the edge.
We might fall.
Come to the edge.
It's too high!
COME TO THE EDGE!
And they came,

and he pushed,
and they flew.

—Christopher Logue

These lines encapsulate my philosophy of teaching. I have been a special education teacher for 17 years. The students that come to me have often met with a great deal of frustration and/or failure. More times than not, they have very little confidence in their scholastic and intellectual abilities, resulting in low self-esteem. They don't like school. Many exhibit behavioral difficulties as a result of years of struggling and

failing academically or as a result of an etiological disability.

It is my passion to take these students into my class, build their trust in me, not only as a teacher, but a person as well. I try to strengthen their confidence by showing them how to succeed in school and behave in society.

I teach them that life is not always fair, that change is seldom fast, that we must be persistent in the pursuit of our dreams, and that we must never, never, never, EVER give up.

Once my students, with my help, are motivated to achieve academically and to believe in themselves, they WILL fly!

Student-centered Classroom

Lisa Wilkinson K Secondary Alternative Center K Grades 6-12
K Language Arts, English, and ESL Reading

My name is Lisa Wilkinson, and I teach Language Arts, English, Reading, and ESL. to sixth- through twelfth-grade students at the SAC [Secondary Alternative Center, housed on the Alternative Learning Center (ALC) campus]. While these academic areas are important, I believe it is also a vital ingredient in learning to create a student-centered environment where all students are comfortable to take risks and learn successfully. Having a student-centered environment in the particular school where I teach now is paramount to leaning and inspiring students to read and write.

Before I ever became a teacher with my own classroom of students, I wanted to create an environment that promotes understanding, compassion, and kindness. I believe that creating a student-centered environment encourages all students to participate and learn. I feel that the classroom is the place to promote

tolerance, kindness, compassion—a place where the individual feels less alone. I want my students to trust me and each other, so they will be more open to learning and able to take the risks associated with learning.

Today, my philosophy of compassion and understanding is still the same. Today, I have my own three daughters who sit in high school and junior high school classrooms. I always try to imagine how I would want their classrooms to be—challenging, encouraging, passionate, and involved. I listen to my students' ideas, thoughts, and stories. I support their dreams and try to encourage them to be all that they can.

In our classrooms, if we can teach students to think for themselves and practice compassion and tolerance, we have the opportunity to encourage the next generation and strengthen tomorrow's leaders.

She Made the Words Come Alive

Sarah S. Wright K Watkins Middle School K Grade 7 K
Language Arts

Freshman English—that was the class that started it all. The class involved novel after novel, essay after essay, and one teacher. She was the center of everything. Mrs. Garrett was the teacher who transformed an unchallenged teenager into a learner and lover of the written word.

When she taught, the words came alive on the page. We were educated early-on in her class that we were not simply to read the words, but to experience them. We embarked on a journey together with our teacher that allowed us to do just that. Whether it was acting out plays

as if we were polished actors or engaging in mock trials in order to gain a true understanding of the court battle in our current novel, we were experiencing the power of the written word. I did not merely take an English class from Mrs. Garrett. I caught a passion that is still alive in me today.

I strive daily to have my students experience that same journey and that same passion Mrs. Garrett fostered in me many years ago. In each lesson I develop and activity I plan, my students are my overall focus. I desire for them to take something more out of my class than simply

head-knowledge of parts of speech and literary terms. I want them to leave my classroom with the knowledge of how compelling and life-changing words can be.

My students and I are currently in the process of reading a novel. I anticipate each morning what the day will hold for us as we travel through the novel together. What personal connections

to the text will they make today? What real-life applications will they discover today? What curious questions will they have today?

It is a privilege to be able to see students begin to catch that passion a little more each passing day. If only one student leaves my classroom this year with a deeper love for the written word, then I have done my job.

The Little Things

Frances Yeane K Sheridan Elementary School K Reading
Enrichment

A fellow teacher recently shared with me an essay that one of her students had written. The assignment was to write about who their favorite teacher was and why. I was so honored that L. had written about me. Reading her essay made me realize that it is the little things we do each day that sometimes make the strongest impact on our students.

She wrote about how she felt loved because I was always happy to see them in the morning. She also remembered a time that I made them cookies because they had been good in class. Reading this essay reminded me that we always need to make sure that we show our students that we are happy to have them in our class and show them our appreciation for their good work.

Next, she wrote about how caring she felt I was. She said that I always took the time to listen if she or her friends seemed sad. She remembered a time that I told her that I cared for

her and told her she could always talk to me about anything. I try to remind myself daily that my students often have a lot of other worries that they come to class with and that I need to take the time to listen if they are going to be able to concentrate on learning that day.

Last, she talked about my always laughing with the class. She remembered my making up jokes for the class and trying to make things fun. She also talked about a time that I laughed at myself when I made a mistake. Reading about this observation showed me the importance of making the classroom a fun environment where we learn from our mistakes. Good teaching techniques form the basis of a good classroom; however, we can't forget the little things. We need to show the students that we love them, care about them, and, most of all, we need to take the time to laugh with them.

Positive Role Model

A CFISD teacher is a *positive role model* who displays the values and norms defined by good citizenship as well as the personal qualities frequently associated with effective, productive lives—trustworthy, responsible, persistent, optimistic, and respectful of self and others.

A Tribute to the Teachers in My Life

Debbie Brewer K Campbell Middle School K Grades 6, 7, and 8
K Coach / Cross-country and Track

Throughout my life and my years as a student and a teacher, there have been many teachable moments. For most of these moments, I have been the recipient of the new knowledge.

The stage was set for my learning to begin with the best teachers of all—my parents, Charles and Lillian Hill. They taught me, and continue to teach me by example, about the true meaning of living a loving and giving life. My first-grade teacher, Mrs. Margie Pollock, taught me about fairness and firmness.

My third-grade teacher, Mr. Gary Hintz, taught me about finding fun in learning. During my junior high years, my coach, Mrs. Wanda Schultz, showed me how teachers can take a personal interest in their students. Linda Kubiak, Sadie Woodard, and Joy Massey were my high school coaches who taught me about setting goals and having high expectations.

In 1974, I was very fortunate to start my teaching career under the principalship of Bill

Borgers. He taught me that positive reinforcement works better than negative when trying to change behaviors. For me, "Building Better Relationships" started in the early '70s!

As my career in education continued, I learned from George Hopper that everyone has a job and everyone should be doing his or her job; therefore, the philosophy of time-on-task became a top priority for me and my students. Under Leonard Brautigam's leadership, I learned that people who care show it and say it.

Sue Pope taught me that there is a solution for every situation; you just have to keep looking for it and working on it. Gwen Keith's advice was, "If you see something you don't like, change it. If you can't change it, change the way you look at it."

All of these people have had a huge impact on my life, and, by applying these life lessons, I feel that I, too, have become a positive role model for others.

Hey, Hey!

Kathy Chambers K Aragon Middle School K Grades 7 and 8 K
Family & Consumer Sciences

I have been teaching Family and Consumer Sciences to 7th and 8th graders for 29 years. They are truly a unique group—they can change

moods in the blink of an eye—but, despite all of this, I love them.

My classes are very diverse, but they all have one thing in common—their self-esteem (or, rather, their lack of it). I decided to take on the challenge of helping my students improve their self-esteem. I put "Positivity" into my classroom.

I decorate my room with smiley faces and positive posters, I greet the students at the door every day, and I start class with two affirmations:

- I ask, "What kind of day do you want to have?"

They answer, "Positive!"

- I say, "Hey, Hey!"

They respond, "I like myself!"

I will admit, at the beginning, the students think I am bit strange, but I tell them that I would rather be strange than boring.

I use these affirmations as a part of my classroom management also. I teach Positive Social Manners throughout the course and encourage the students to practice these skills every day. I have received notes from students thanking me for helping them to be more positive. I have been very pleased with the progress of my students, but this positive environment has also made me a better person and teacher.

It is a great feeling to come to school each day asking "What kind of day do I want to have?" and, hey, at the end of the day, I can say, "I like myself."

You Do Reap What You Sow

Maryetta Easton K Lowery Elementary School K Grade 4 K
Social Studies

Thanks, Ms. Parks, for what you did for me! This famous person was my tenth-grade English teacher. I remember sitting in her class all year and thinking, "One day, I want to be like you."

She was the best teacher I ever had. In her class, the environment was warm because of the person that she was. I could not wait to get to her class. She exemplified a good citizen with responsibility towards us (her kids), and even with her peers. Her voice was pleasant to everyone that she came in contact with. I never saw or heard Ms. Parks get upset or angry with any of her kids. I do not know where she hid her anger, but she kept it away from us. She sowed

into me the qualities of responsibility, kindness, warmth, and respect for self and others.

Now, in my teaching career, I am reaping the seeds that she so passionately planted. Students *do* watch and listen to us as educators. They make mental notes of our actions. In my classes, I now encourage my students to be responsible, kind, and respectful to others and to themselves.

I have had the pleasure of seeing former students return to my classroom for a visit. It makes me laugh when they say, "Mrs. Easton, I remember the time when you..."

Then, we laugh as we go down memory lane. I, too, am now planting seeds!

Something Old, Something New

Jeffrey M. Jackson K Adaptive Behavior Center K Science and
Social Studies

In addition to this honor, I am also celebrating my 15th year as a teacher in the Cypress-Fairbanks ISD. Actually, I have been with the district for a little over 35 years—if I count the day that I first entered Mrs. McGee's fourth-grade homeroom at Matzke Elementary that cool January morning in 1969. I went on to attend

Arnold Junior High and eventually became a 1977 graduate of Cy-Fair High School.

Over the years, I have heard of some teachers being referred to as a "real person." I recognized this quality in my high school biology instructor, Mr. Saenz. I consider him a role model because he was so personable to his students while also educating them about the

importance of biology. Mr. Saenz could joke around a little and make learning in his classroom fun.

Mr. Saenz still educates in the district, and, over the years, I have had the good fortune of visiting with my former teacher at several science in-service days at the beginning of each school year. This past August, I saw him once again upon my arrival at our "old" school. I tagged along with him to the opening session. We sat together and chatted while we worked out some science problems. I finally paid him back for all his efforts when I left and brought him back a fresh, hot cup of coffee.

I never considered myself a true leader, but neither did I regard myself as a person who

would simply "get out of the way." So, since I'm somewhat of a follower, it still helps me in this profession to have good role models that I can turn to for advice and assistance. In my building, there are lots of individuals who demonstrate role-model characteristics. Whether it is the administrative staff or my classroom co-workers, I can look to them for support and rely on them to model appropriate ways to deal with difficult and extraordinary situations. I hope to continue learning from others. I also look forward to putting my past 15 years of experience into my 16th year in Cypress-Fairbanks as I anticipate the 2004-2005 school year.

You Believed in Me

Lynda Leskey K Horne Elementary School K Grade 1 K Math and Science

It wasn't until my freshman year of high school that I started to enjoy school and believe in myself academically. In that year, I was enrolled in a small Catholic high school where I didn't know anyone. For a very shy student entering high school without any friends and no older sibling to show me "the ropes" of a new school, it was kind of scary. I would never have imagined a teacher having such a lasting impact on my life. I still think about her and my freshman English class.

Why did Mrs. Citerella have such an impact on my life? The one main reason was that she believed in me as a student. She was always

prepared to give a positive remark about my writing and still help me improve the areas where my writing was weak. She took the extra time to help boost my self-esteem in writing when I knew I wasn't the best student. She never made me feel like a failure in her class when I made a mistake, and I always felt comfortable. I really admired her and the way she made our reading and writing assignments interesting. Mrs. Citerella respected us and our opinions, and we had a great deal of respect for her.

Thank you, Mrs. Citerella, for touching my life and believing in me. You truly are a positive role model I will never forget.

Lasting Impressions

Merry Marcotte K Cook Middle School K Grades 6-7-8 K Choir K Electives Department Chair

Making music and touching students' lives through music is my passion. However, I believe my most important job as a teacher is being a positive role model.

I always make an effort to conduct myself in a responsible, respectful way, and I expect my students to do the same. A poster hanging in my classroom encourages, "Never settle for less than your best!" and my students know I expect us all to work to that level every day. By my

having high standards and expectations for both myself and them, my students know I genuinely care about their well-being and always have their best interests at heart.

Eddie Quaid, choir director at Cy-Fair High School, was one of my positive role models growing up. On Christmas Eve of my senior year, he made a special stop at my house on his way out of town to coach me on my Texas All-State Choir audition music. He knew how

important the audition was to me, and his sacrifice made a lasting impression. I made the choir that year and have him to thank for it.

I have tried to model my dedication to teaching after the example he set for me. Many times it means making personal sacrifices, but

seeing the excitement and joy in my students when they are successful far outweighs those small sacrifices. I hope this dedication creates memories my students will carry with them for a lifetime.

Good, Better, Best

Michelle Martin K Ault Elementary School K Grade 4 K
Reading and Social Studies

Work hard! Do your best! My fifth-grade teacher instilled that positive work ethic in me. She believed in everyone!

Years later, I still remember that catchy saying and strive to live by it. There are lots of positive role models in my life. I work with the very best of them. It is not difficult to walk around with a smile on my face or a bounce in my step when I am fortunate enough to work at Ault. I truly believe my positive attitude stems from the fountain of positive role models that I encounter daily.

My day always begins with bright eyes and warm smiles from my students, who are so eager to start the day. They are all full of wonder and excitement. Twenty-two hellos and hugs can start any day off in the right direction.

As my day continues, I feel the continuous support of my administrative team encouraging me to strive to be my very best, to reach my goals, and to set higher ones. Why not reach for the stars?

When the day comes to a close, my teammates are always there to share stories, lessons, experiences, laughter, tears, and true support. What would I do without my team, my friends, my family?

People say smiling is contagious; I happen to agree! I also truly believe that having a positive attitude and sharing it with others will cause the same effect. It is true. I have seen it daily, at its BEST!

Being an Art Teacher Means...

Bobbe Lynn Motsinger K Bang Elementary School K Grades K-5
K Art

Being an art teacher means...

- ...teaching the curriculum through arts.
- ...teaching core essentials.
- ...ruining every piece of clothing you own.
- ...being grateful for gifts of toilet-paper tubes, paper-towel rolls, and scraps of anything.
- ...shopping at garage sales for yarn, material, beads, feathers, or any treasure that might be put to use (too many possibilities).
- ...a house bursting with what looks like junk to others because you're afraid to throw anything away.
- ...always looking for ideas that can be made new and your own.
- ...spending your vacation taking classes to renew ideas and your skills.
- ...collecting old dust-covered, sun-bleached animals' bones and skulls (anything for a still life).
- ...spending hours—no, days—mounting and matting pieces of artwork so that they will look their best.

- ...agonizing over how you can possibly hang all the art that is unique and special. (They all are.)
- ...convincing students it is all right to make mistakes because salvaging mistakes often creates our best work—and what's wrong with "off the page"?
- ...having time to complete that last piece of work or to clean up.
- ...teaching about and being inspired by artists' lives and the ways they overcame their struggles.
- ...teaching and showing history through works of art.
- ...seeing the pride in students' eyes when they achieve the desired results.
- ...being blessed to work with a "faculty extraordinaire" who are helpful—full of warmth and love.

In fact, most of these things aren't limited to art—you could say, instead, "Being *any* teacher means..."

I want to thank Cindy Barclift for giving me the opportunity to fulfill a dream I had forgotten about years ago when I began college. Thank you for

this honor—it is due to the patience and support of my family, friends, and colleagues at Bang, Sheridan, and Lieder over the past 20 years.

A Grateful Heart

Esther Robinson K Langham Creek High School K U.S. History
/ AP and ESL K Social Studies Department Chair

“What you seem to be, be really.”

—Ben Franklin

I always wanted to be a teacher. As a matter of fact, I always wanted to be a history teacher. My father, a naturalized American citizen, loves history, as did his father and grandfather before him. However, he did not have the opportunity to continue his education past the eighth grade because he had to go to work at the age of 13 to support his family.

A child of the Great Depression and World War II, my dad always had to work hard to keep food on the table and a roof overhead. He was willing to do whatever was necessary to provide for his family. My mother shared his vision, and together they created a nurturing environment for their three children.

We spent every summer camping, and our itinerary always included some type of national battlefield, landmark, or park. My parents modeled for their children the values inherent in the study of history—from the stories of the proud Norwegian immigrant heritage of my maternal grandparents to the fascinating tales of the Welsh and British heritage of my paternal grandparents in Canada.

As I grew up, I, too, developed a love for history, and my teachers were my role models. In sixth grade, Mr. Hoffman regaled us with stories about his college days as a student activist, and he encouraged us to become involved in the fledgling environmental movement. My sophomore Global History teacher showed up one day dressed as a medieval king. He spoke in Old English for the entire period, challenging us to analyze the language and culture of the era, rather than simply imploring us to memorize boring facts from the book.

On a daily basis, my junior U.S. History teacher emphasized the importance of relating current events to their historical roots—which, at the time, meant trying to untangle the events of Vietnam and Watergate as they were unfolding.

Each of these individuals, my parents, and my teachers played an important part in molding me into the person I am today. I pray daily for guidance in honoring their efforts, modeling the values of love and respect for the students in my classroom, as well as imparting my love for the history of our great country.

Making a Difference

Monica Carpenter Robinson K Willbern Elementary School K
KindergartenK HORIZONS

When I think back to my early school days, I remember not feeling good about myself. In kindergarten, I had an “accident” and ruined my brand-new white shoes. In first grade, I was in the “bluebird” group—and everyone knew, if you were in *that* group, that you could not read. President Kennedy was killed when I was in second grade, and I continued to struggle with reading and math. Third grade brought a standardized test. I remember I picked answer B

for all the reading questions, and 9 was my answer for all of the math questions.

Then came fourth grade with Mrs. Newsome. She was the first teacher who seemed to care that I could not read. Mrs. Newsome took the time to teach me to read even though I could not sound out words. Before then, I was only taught to read through phonics, which did not work because I could not hear the sounds in the words.

Once I could read, it seemed that nothing could stop me from learning. Mrs. Newsome was the first positive role model in my school life. She was the reason I became a teacher.

For the past 25 years, I have strived to be a positive role model for the many students I have

taught. Like Mrs. Newsome, I value every child who walks through my door, regardless of ability. I believe in my kids, I cheer them on, I celebrate their successes, and I make sure that they believe in themselves. My goal is to make a difference in their lives.

The Mustard Seed

Brenda Spillman K Bane Elementary School K Grade 4 K
Language Arts

A few years back, as I was packing up my things to close out the school year, I found a folded paper on the corner of my desk. I distractedly scanned it and then took a second look. I read, "I like it that you came to school every day." It was signed by a student I'll call M. I couldn't help smiling. M. was the good little student that you sometimes overlooked because you were focused on the ones who demanded and received your attention. In fact, she represented the student that I had always been.

I pictured that teacher we all seem to remember—the stern disciplinarian who silenced the class with one glance and always demanded that you do your best. She was the first teacher to notice the shy girl sitting toward the back of the classroom, seldom holding up her hand, never crowding around her teacher, but always yearning to be noticed.

Mrs. B. didn't have favorites, but she looked into my heart and saw my need. It didn't take much for her to win my respect and admiration.

As the year drew to a close, I knew that I would be moving once again. As we filed past Mrs. B. on the last day, she held each of our hands to say good-bye. As my turn came, she slipped a small wrapped package into my hand. She looked into my eyes; her brown eyes sparkled as we said good-bye. I walked home, overwhelmed by the knowledge that she had given me a special gift. Inside the wrapping, on a silver chain, dangled a small, clear-glass ball, a mustard seed tucked inside.

Fifth grade began, and I was still quiet and shy. But this year, as I sat at my desk, fingering my mustard seed necklace, I had an inner strength and confidence that I owed to Mrs. B.

I reread my note from M. understanding that, although I hadn't given her a mustard seed necklace, I had given her the gift of "being there" for her every day. With each new school year, I survey my class—noting my obvious challenges, searching for my M's, and thanking Mrs. B. for her insight and wisdom.

Playing School

Lisa Stewart K Hamilton Elementary School K Special
Education Resource and Co-teacher

As long as I can remember, I have always wanted to be a teacher. My childhood memories consist of countless hours of me "playing school." I would assume the role of my favorite teacher as I took attendance and taught a lesson to my imaginary class. I would even mimic my teachers' mannerisms as a true sign of admiration. As time went by and I entered junior high and high school, I continued "playing school," but only in my mind. My dream was to be a teacher. So, after high school, I set out to pursue a degree in education.

After my dream of being a "real" teacher became a reality, I remembered how much I had adored and admired my teachers for encouraging me and for being such positive role models. I hoped that I would be able to accomplish the same for my students.

Now 18 years have passed since I first became that "real" teacher, and, through those years, I've had the pleasure of teaching first, third and fourth grades, ESL, GT, and, currently, special ed.

My dedication to making a difference in children's lives becomes evident to me every year when I receive Christmas letters, graduation announcements, wedding invitations, and

messages from former students and parents. These continued acts of appreciation and acknowledgment have become my inspiration to continue "playing school."

Recipe for an Exceptional Teacher with a Touch of Class

Maria A. Trejo K Millsap Elementary School K Bilingual
Kindergarten

An extension of teaching is to guide and train teachers during their initiation into the teaching field. Having had the opportunity to mentor several teachers, I'd like to share a recipe for excellence in teaching. You will need ingredients found commonly only in a teacher's heart.

Ingredients

- 20 cups of Love (adjust according to the number of students in your class)
- 10 cups of Patience (one for every month)
- 1 extra-large package of Humor (found at your neighborhood Dollar Store)
- 1 large package of All-purpose Dedication (can't teach without it)
- 5 ounces of Flexibility (one for each day—fresh, not frozen)
- 1 jar of Positive Attitude (boil until bubbly)
- A pinch of Passion and Determination (a little goes a long way)

Take these ingredients, mix well, and spread the mixture evenly inside your classroom for one year. At the end of one year, you'll have students you are proud of; people will think they were store-bought. This recipe may be adjusted, but the main ingredients remain the same. Feel free to garnish as desired.

Note: You need not be experienced to follow the recipe, but, definitely, keeping an open mind and positive outlook is a must.

Making a Difference

Elizabeth Villarreal K Walker Elementary School K Bilingual
Grade 1

My parents are my inspiration. Growing up as a migrant worker in a small town in South Texas, I remember my dad saying in Spanish, "You need to get a good education, or you are going to work in the cotton fields all of your life, like me." In their hearts, they truly valued education and wished to see that aspiration fulfilled in their seven children. Their desire motivated me to become an educator. I was attending college full-time when financial hardships made it impossible for me to continue. I dropped out before achieving my goal.

I went to work as a paraprofessional with the Austin Independent School District, where I worked with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students. The challenge was to teach them English in spite of their home lives. Mrs. Paige, who taught 3rd-grade LEP students, was my supervisor and my role model. She was a very

caring teacher. She loved children and encouraged them to do their best.

I remember a lesson she was conducting on being different. She explained to the students that speaking two languages would someday be important to them. Mrs. Paige was always working after school with parents on how to improve their children's education. She provided the parents with strategies to help their children with homework, reading, and math. Mrs. Paige guided, motivated, and inspired me to value the use of the two languages. She made such a big difference in my life that I decided to go back to college and become a teacher of bilingual students.

I have been working for 14 years as a bilingual teacher. About three years ago, I chose to work with the district's "Bilingual Saturday Scholars" program as a computer teacher under

Mrs. Diana Marion, coordinator of the Cypress-Fairbanks Bilingual/ESL program. Mrs. Marion has made a positive impact on teachers, children, and parents in the district. Through Bilingual Saturday Scholars, Mrs. Marion has instilled in parents that education is very important. She has provided parents with ESL and computer skills, enabling them to help their children with homework and computer use.

This year, I got a student in my class whose parent is enrolled in Bilingual Saturday Scholars. This first-grade student loves to work on the computer every minute she can. I asked her how she knew so much about computers. She

responded, "My mother is taking computer classes with you, and she has taught me what she learned."

I am not certain what the future holds for me, but I will continue to work hard in making a difference in my community and accomplishing my goals as a teacher and a mentor. These two role models have shaped who I am as a teacher.

I have set high standards for my students. I teach them that, through hard work and persistence, they, too, can achieve their goals. I am honored to be the Spotlight teacher at Walker Elementary.

Common Threads of Values

Susan Widner K Hancock Elementary School K Grade 2 K
Language Arts

Common threads of values and principles come to mind as I reflect on those who have made the most impact on my teaching. These valued threads are honesty, integrity, responsibility, respect for self and others, humility, character, and strength. These threads, woven together, have created the complex fabric of who I am. They are bound together with love, excitement, fun, laughter, and a sense of humor.

Many individuals have contributed these common threads to my life and my teaching, but a few stand out as strong influences. My parents, who instilled in me the values of hard work, dedication, and a good education, shaped my early life.

Two strong ladies, both educators, sparked my interest in teaching due to their love of learning and deep caring for their students. My great-aunt, Emma Finch, who taught school for 50 years, was a positive person who was remarkable in the way she made learning an adventure. My sixth-grade teacher, Edith Moore,

challenged us and set high expectations for all of her students.

Throughout my 24 years at Hancock, many others have been my role models and have influenced my teaching—fellow educators, student teachers, and administrators. I have taken valued threads from each of these individuals and woven them into the fabric of my life of teaching.

My life's work has been to make a difference in the lives of each and every one of my students. My hope is that I have woven some threads of values into them as well. I feel that I have been doing something truly worthwhile with my life.

"Real joy comes not
from ease or riches
or from the praise of men,
but from doing something worthwhile."
—Sir Wilfred T. Grenfell

Setting an Example

Antonia M. Wong K Cypress Creek High School K Spanish for
Native Speakers K Spanish IV-AP

I have often been told that my strength is in being a positive role model. I am grateful for this praise. Because I grew up in a multicultural household and now have one myself, I feel I

have been exposed to the beauty of other cultures. I teach Spanish for Native Speakers as well as Spanish IV-A.P. I am also the sponsor of the Asia Club at Cypress Creek High School.

With all three groups, I always try to promote tolerance.

Many of my native speakers come into my class totally unmotivated. Being half-Latina myself, I try to instill in them a feeling of self-worth from day one. I tell the students that they must have “GANAS” to succeed in life. This term means “willpower.” In the movie *Stand and Deliver*, which I show in Spanish at the beginning of the school year, the students learn about Master Teacher Jaime Escalante, “GANAS,” and the A.P. Exams.

Mother Teresa said, “We can do no great things; only small things with great love.” I hope my students remember me as someone who

truly loved them! I also love my non-Hispanic students. Through literature, art, and music, I reveal to my non-Hispanic students the beauty of the Spanish language.

My Asia Club recently put on a wonderful Culture Night for the whole school. We had students from the different ethnic groups and races in our school perform. Treating my students with respect and developing patience and compassion are practices that I have learned over a lifetime. One never knows when one is setting an example for another. We can only see the results. I am happy with what I am seeing.

It Is the Little Lessons That Count

Brenda Yanowski K Cypress Springs High School K Physical Education K Cheerleader Sponsor

As a teacher, I often wonder if I have conveyed to my students in my actions and words what I feel is important. Did the lessons that are important for life get lost in the shuffle of the frenetic activities of high school? Or have I, unaware, been teaching life lessons all along? Being selected as Cypress Springs’s Spotlight teacher has provided the opportunity for me to reflect on the lessons I’ve been taught throughout my life and the ways they have influenced my teaching.

The most important and influential role models in my life have been my parents. My mom and dad have always taught me to treat people, no matter what their ages, with the same respect I would want to be treated with. I model this lesson in my class on a daily basis. My expectations are that students should respect each other, their teachers, their facility, and themselves and that they should expect the same from their classmates. I feel that respect leads to a positive class atmosphere, thus helping a student’s comfort level. Once this consideration has been achieved, my students are willing to try new things.

While teaching, I have had many colleagues who are positive role models. Perhaps the one person making the biggest impact on me is Cypress Springs’s Principal, Sarah Harty. After 21 years of coaching, I decided to give it up, and I found that I had many extra hours available. Mrs. Harty opened my eyes to all the ways students are representing our school other than through athletics. Attending everything from drama’s one-act plays to Ag’s auctions to the “Step” club’s performances has shown me the variety of talents our students have. Most importantly, though, I have seen the dedication of the CFISD family as its members work inside and outside the classroom to help students be successful.

Every student needs positive role models to help him or her grow. I am very thankful for the people in my life who have helped me be the person chosen as Cypress Springs’s Spotlight teacher. My career is a joyful one because I try to make a difference each and every day for my students.

Lifelong Learner

A CFISD teacher is a *lifelong learner* who exemplifies the spirit of continuous improvement through selection of and attitude toward activities which foster personal and professional development.

I've Come a Long Way

Sheila Bartley K Cypress Ridge High School K English K
Department Chair

I have come a long way since that first year of frustration and exhilaration. In 1974, I was given a textbook and a roster of students; that was all. The routine was to lecture, assign homework, and then administer a multiple-choice exam. I did this well.

In 1979, I quit teaching to raise my family, and I began my child psychology training. I have no degree, but I have the scars and photos to prove I spent time learning about children. I learned that even children with all of the advantages did not turn in homework, waited until the night before to do a project, and were not motivated to do their best. What's up with that? Why the bad choices? They were kids, and kids make mistakes.

When I returned to teaching in 1989, my years at Parenthood State University provided me the foundation for a new approach to students. If all children did not have a *Leave It to Beaver* family, then it was up to me to create a supportive, enriched environment where students knew that, if they made mistakes, they got a second chance, a do-over. They, in turn, excused my

many mistakes. Symbiotic relationships relieve pressure for both parties.

This district has provided me with many opportunities to grow professionally. Staff development, which, in my early teaching career, was the weekly faculty meeting, has taught me that students access different modalities to learn. Personality typing painted a gold, blue, orange and green rainbow, providing me insight into how individual students interact with their environment. The brain's complexities and the ways I can use that knowledge to make learning fun and relevant fascinate me. Finally, I push my students to higher-order thinking and watch their self-esteem zoom when they navigate a difficult concept. Success fosters continued success.

Ultimately, the most important concept I have learned throughout my career is that I must teach ALL children, and it is my job to help my students understand that knowledge is power. As Richard Henry Dunn said, "He who dares to teach must never cease to learn." I say, "She who dares to teach learns every day."

Motivating Lifelong Learners

Terri Gorsulowsky K Francone Elementary School K Grade 2 K
Language Arts

"To the world, you may be one person,
but to one person, you may be the world."

—Unknown

This saying was true of my second-grade teacher. At a time when teaching seemed to be

black-and-white, this teacher's excitement added color to the art of teaching. Her kindness and ability to help children with various styles of learning have always been good memories for me. She was my world.

Now, as I am in the classroom, her enthusiasm continues to inspire me. The love of children and the enthusiasm of sharing and learning new knowledge motivate me to develop and refine my skills continuously. If we are excited about what we teach, our students can be excited about what they learn. As Ralph

Waldo Emerson once said, "Nothing is ever achieved without enthusiasm." It is my continued commitment to search for activities, strategies, and methods that, I hope, will enhance the children's learning and foster their desire to be lifelong learners.

How Did He Do It?

Kathy Grace K Labay Middle School K Grade 7 Reading K
Dyslexia K Reading Department Chair

How did a 15-year-old seventh grader manage to teach me so many life lessons? I first met J. when he was a sixth grader enrolled in the reading class across the hall from mine. He was frequently absent, and his teacher would often send him into my room to make up missed exams. J. was a fairly shy struggling reader. When I offered to answer questions or assist with directions, he seemed appreciative, and I enjoyed the brief time we spent together. Therefore, I was pleased when I saw his name on one of my roll sheets that August.

Unfortunately, J. had experienced some serious family upheaval over the summer and had returned to school bitter and angry. I was shocked by the changes I saw in him, until his younger sister revealed their personal family history. At that point, I knew it was going to take lots of patience and special attention if I was going to form a positive relationship with J. He warmed up to me after a few weeks, and things were going fairly well; so, without a moment's hesitation, I scrawled my name next to his on the mentor sheet when the time came for us to choose mentees. I had no idea what I was getting into at that point.

As the year progressed, J. and I spent many hours working together after school. He began to open up to me. Eventually, he began to share more about his personal life than I wanted to know. Before I knew it, my room had become

his locker. He began to keep all of his belongings on my bookshelf so he could see me during each class change. We began to form a bond that I could not have predicted and still cannot explain.

J's attitude toward his schoolwork was beginning to improve. Things were really looking up just about the time he exercised poor judgment and committed a serious level-IV offense that caused him to be sent to the Alternative Learning Center for six weeks. The strangest feeling came over me when I heard the news, and it was then that I realized I had grown to love J. like my own child.

Eventually, he earned his way back to our campus. He set about working hard and behaving in all of his classes. He spent hours working with me after school. I thought my heart would burst with pride when I saw his fourth six-weeks' report card—five B's and two C's (one of the C's was in athletics). Cool as he was, even J. could not hide the grin on his face when I showed him his grades. That was truly a triumphant moment.

I wish I could say this event was a turning point and everything was smooth sailing from then on. I wish I could say I'm sure he won't drop out at 17. I wish I could say I had transformed a hardened, street-wise child into a saint. That's not the case. It's the small signs of progress that I have learned to treasure.

Metamorphosis

Peggy Holloway K Dean Middle School K Grade 8 K Science K
Team Leader K Co-lead Mentor

After teaching sixth-grade "wiggling caterpillars" for 10 years, always wrapping them

in a chrysalis of self-confidence, understanding,

humor, and science, I realized that, like Mother Nature, I needed a metamorphosis myself.

Not only would I be moving to a new butterfly field (district and school), but I also would be changes stages of development—to eighth-grade “butterflies.”

Science I knew, but being a new teacher in the school was scary! My first day was a psychological disaster because I was used to being a “caterpillar wrapper,” not a “butterfly blower,” and I did not feel confident. I spoke to “Madame Butterfly” (my daughter Kristin), saying, “I made a big mistake.” She said, “Mom, treat them like you did us when we were that age.”

After heeding these words of wisdom, I found that my next day was a different story. I realized that I *could* be a “butterfly blower”; after all, my

two children are proof of this theory. My first year at Dean was wonderful, and my principal even asked me to be one of the lead mentors for the next year.

This metamorphosis in my life extinguished my burnout and ignited excitement again for teaching students and mentoring new teachers. Only after experiencing this change could I empathize with my eighth graders and try to equip them with knowledge to lessen their stress as they ventured into future “fields” of learning in high school. This experience has helped me in aiding the growth and development of our new teachers in their quest to become a “butterfly”—and possibly a Spotlight teacher.

I love being a “butterfly blower!”

You Can Teach an Old Dog New Tricks!

Bobbie Koen K Reed Elementary School K Grade s K-5K
Resource K Dyslexia K Special Education Liaison

It seems that I’ve been learning to teach ever since that first “classroom” I created in the corner of the garage when I was a kid. Then, during my first year in a real classroom, I discovered the joy of reaching that one kid who didn’t “get it” at first, and I was hooked on special education.

This field demands that you wear many hats. Developing skills related to psychology, speech, language, and fine- and gross-motor activities is required for survival. Taking advantage of professional development opportunities is a necessity and is often a fulfilling responsibility. Finding the time is always a challenge.

It’s interesting to be at this point in my career. I can see how the many and varied experiences, training sessions, and workshops in which I have

participated all contribute to the bank of skills that make it possible to reach that next kid. Truth be told, though, it was the Early Literacy Training that I received from Barbara Levandoski and Cindy Adams that provided the most personal satisfaction.

When I got my teacher training (back in the dark ages!), “reading instruction” meant reading the teacher’s part of the basal text. It took twenty-some years and the expertise of these two women to unlock the real power of a balanced literacy program for me.

Now, I truly feel empowered to give my students exactly the elements they need to become better readers. My bag of tricks has gotten much bigger, thanks to lifelong learning!

A Teacher’s Lesson

Kendall McKinney K Sampson Elementary School K Grade 3 Co-teach / Language Arts and Math K Grade 5 Co-teach / Language Arts

Surprised, shocked, and truly honored. These emotions are what I felt when I learned I was being recognized as a Spotlight teacher this

year. It is an incredible honor when I think of all the worthy teachers I work with. As a special education teacher, I have worked alongside

some of the most outstanding teachers, and each time I have walked away a better teacher.

Looking back over the years, I have come to realize that it is the students who have had the biggest impact on me as a teacher. I remember the sweet, angry little boy who had lost his mother to a brain tumor and was afraid to trust or love. When he left after his fifth-grade year, he wasn't afraid anymore.

There is also the second grader who declared, "I learned to read today!" after finishing his first book. I have also taught several dyslexic students who left elementary school achieving on-grade-level and taking TAKS—students who

had exhibited below-grade-level performance for several years.

I can't forget the gifted student with a visual impairment and autism whom I had the pleasure of working with for several years. He came so far, and I was blessed with his gift for music when he played the music at my wedding. So many wonderful students have touched me. While it was my job to teach them, they really taught me about the difference it can make to have someone believe in you, never give up on you, and be there when you have your moment to shine.

Becoming "Real"

Debbie Meehan K Gleason Elementary School K Grade 4 K
Language Arts

It took me a long time to figure out what I wanted to be as an adult. Once I had children, I knew I wanted to be a teacher. As I watched my children grow through their infancy and toddler years, I was amazed (as all parents are) by their insatiable quest to explore and expand their world. I wanted to be part of this process.

When my children started school, I was fascinated by the fluid skill of their teachers. Because I was available to volunteer, I witnessed what I considered to be some amazing lessons. In the early eighties, when one of my sons was in the first or second grade, his teacher called and asked me to help on one of her "centers" days. I can still see her holding up tongue depressors with colored circles on them. The color of the circle directed the children to a particular activity that would polish their skills on ABC order, so they could locate information quickly and effectively. The students were working with residential phone books, the yellow pages, and timers. They had a series of tasks to complete (before the timers went off), all written out on little cards. The lesson went like clockwork and was so much fun I wanted to play, too!

So I went back to school to become a teacher. Full of high aspirations and dreams. Full of boundless energy. Within the first year of teaching, I found out that the little lesson I had seen was comparable to a professional football game, or maybe even a performance by the Boston Symphony! Way out of my league—

regardless of my high hopes and unflagging energy.

It was only over the years, that—slowly, bit by bit, lesson by lesson, evaluation after evaluation—I became proficient at my craft. In recent years, it has occurred to me that teaching is like the story *The Velveteen Rabbit*. A teacher is something you become. And, as the Skin Horse mused, "It takes a long time."

Over the years, I have worked with a battalion of teachers, and from so many of them I've gathered new gemstones to help with this process of teaching. From them, I've learned that teaching is a passion and a gift (however small) that we can give the world. Toni Morrison said in an interview recently that each generation has its own kind of love, depending on the circumstances of its existence. I think the love our profession wants to give our students (regardless of our generation) is doors—all open—with nothing closed off because of unfortunate decisions, or lost opportunities, or feelings of failure, or lessons never learned or taught.

A teacher's love asks that each child achieve his personal best, and it is gratified when that event occurs, regardless of how others may judge the child. This is what I have learned from teaching and what I continue to learn. As a teacher, I am perpetually becoming, thanks to the children. We are molded by our students

even as we mold them. And that is how we

become "real"...teachers.

The Village People

Kathleen Moreman K Bleyl Middle School K Grade 8 K Language Arts

I agree with the African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child." The same could be said about "raising" a teacher. I always dreamed of being the type of teacher who made a difference in every child. I dreamed of making school so interesting that my students could not help but absorb everything I taught. Boy, did I have a lot to learn.

I come from a very close family. They were my first teachers. My father taught me to speak my mind while always keeping my sense of humor. My mother taught me compassion and a no-nonsense approach to problem-solving. My brothers taught me loyalty. My son taught me unconditional love. I didn't realize how much I would have to fall back on these teachings as my career evolved.

My family was not the only influence on my teaching, however. I have to give credit to the

thousand or so students over the years who challenged me to see them as individuals. They taught me that everyone sees the world through slightly different eyes. They taught me to roll with the punches. I learned that even the best-laid (lesson) plans could flop. They taught me to look for their talents and allow them to use those talents whenever possible in my class. I learned that students will perform up (or down) to a teacher's expectations.

I also learned from other professionals. I tried to mimic the people I admired. Each one taught me something without ever realizing it. They supported and guided me through the everyday trials each teacher faces. I found that there is no end to the learning process. I thank God that I belong to such a great "village."

The Long Road through Doubt and Discovery

Marilyn Ocker K Thornton Middle School K Grades 6, 7, and 8
K Speech and Theatre Arts K Electives Department Chair

When I was in school, I never wanted to become a teacher. I was going to be an actress. It wasn't until I went to college to study theatre, specializing in acting and directing, that I realized that I wanted to wake up every morning and have a career I was passionate about. That career, I soon realized, was to teach theatre. But just because I was passionate about it didn't necessarily mean I would be good at it.

"We're not too sure what the last teacher did, so we pretty much left her alone. So we'll leave you alone, too." These words greeted me in my first assignment as a high school theatre arts teacher in a very rural community. And alone I was! I was assigned a mentor whose best words of wisdom were, "It is easier to get forgiveness than permission." Needless to say, I made many

mistakes. I did, however, connect with my students, give them a sense of accomplishment, and raise their level of self-esteem when they performed. But I began to believe that being passionate about your subject matter and connecting with your students wasn't enough.

After leaving that assignment, I developed a lot of self-doubt. Am I a good teacher? Am I affecting students in a positive way? When I came to Cy-Fair ISD, all those questions were answered. I remember sitting in the new-teacher orientation meeting when Mr. Berry said, "Welcome to the promised land!" And I have truly felt that his statement that day was genuine.

There is such a commitment to the success of the teacher (as well as the student) in this district. You feel as though there is always

someone to help you in any situation. I remember receiving my curriculum guides with the gleeful anticipation of a child on Christmas morning. I even asked my co-worker, "You mean, I don't have to make up the lessons and activities all by myself?"

Since that first year at Thornton, I have felt the true sense of support and guidance, and I understand the philosophy that is the "Portrait of a Cypress-Fairbanks Teacher." I have tried to live up to that high expectation.

I began to gain confidence in my abilities again. I learned to create lessons that encourage higher-order thinking skills and to get students to ask the eternal question of WHY? I have worked diligently to show my students that they must take an active role in their education. I

have shown them the real-world application of these lessons and the way they will help them become thoughtful, caring, productive members of society.

Then I thought back to all of those questions that once plagued me. Am I affecting students in a positive way? Yes! The proof comes in the form of a student named M. He said that after seeing me taking an interest in all students and encouraging them to improve their skills constantly, no matter how small an improvement, I became his role model.

Because of the support and guidance I found here in Cy-Fair, I became a lifelong learner, constantly striving to better myself and my students. Cy-Fair doesn't just produce excellent students but teachers as well.

Earthworms and the Rain

Jessica Schoenvogel K Adam Elementary School K Grade 3 K
Math and Science

This afternoon, a line of heavy thunderstorms moved through the Greater Houston area dropping a couple inches of rain. It occurred to me that 23 years ago, when I was a third grader, I would not have been able to wait for the rain to stop before I would be outside looking under rocks and in flowerbeds for earthworms. (For some reason, they seemed to come out when it rained.) Today, while teaching my third-grade science class, I once again became a third grader. I learned why earthworms come out when it rains.

As earthworms move through the soil, they create tunnels that hold pockets of air. When these tunnels are filled with rainwater, the

earthworms are forced to the surface for air to breathe. Instead of a classroom of 22 students, today there were 23. Suddenly, I was the biggest student of all. If a thirty-one-year-old teacher can be excited about earthworms and the rain, imagine what it does for a room full of eight- and nine-year-old students. I get to experience that excitement daily.

For nine years, I have been blessed to be a teacher.

For nine years I have been blessed to be a learner.

Today it was earthworms...I cannot wait to see what tomorrow's rain might bring.

Team Player

A CFISD teacher is a *team player* who cooperates with others for the group's benefit, striving to solve problems by using all pertinent data, listening to and valuing others' viewpoints, and actively seeking consensus.

It Takes a Team to Reach a Child

Debbie Andersohn K Moore Elementary School K Grades 1, 2,
and 3 K Reading Enrichment

Shortly after returning home from signing a contract with Cy-Fair to teach second grade, I went into a complete panic! I had never taught at an open-concept school. I felt like a new-teacher all over again, even though I had taught in New Orleans for 11 years. After two days of new teacher orientation and several days of teacher workdays, I was even more anxious than I had been when I signed my contract. Everything seemed so foreign to me—no walls, team planning, teaching methods, and materials.

On the first day of school, I was more apprehensive than my students were. My mentor literally took my hand and walked me through everything step-by-step. We met at school daily about an hour before the students arrived and an hour after they left. She went over all our plans for the day with me in the morning and again in the afternoon so that I

could start and end each day feeling confident and capable. Soon, I realized that the absence of walls, which had so worried me, was no longer a source of anxiety, but rather a “godsend.” It was comforting to look over at my mentor and see that reassuring nod or smile. After the first week, I wondered how I had ever taught without a team and in a walled setting.

It didn't take long to see that the students were the real winners. I was better prepared to meet their needs when I had the support and assistance of my team.

Now that I am a reading specialist, I am even more appreciative of the team of teachers I work with. Working together, we have been able to meet the at-risk children at their individual stages of learning and take them to where they need to be. My team makes me look good!

Bloomin' Like a Rose

Gayle Bellomy K Post Elementary School K Grade 5 K Co-teach
K Dyslexia Specialist

“Miss, look at J.!” exclaimed W., as he directed my attention to his best friend. “At the start of eighth grade, he couldn't read nothin'. He was like a old, dead weed. Now look at him. You taught him to read real good. He's bloomin' like a rose!”

As meaningful as this moment was, it wasn't something that could be accomplished in isolation. It took a team of “gardeners” to cultivate this rose. My principal was so committed to meeting this student's needs that

she sent me to Dallas for training. She followed up by purchasing materials necessary to implement an effective program. The other eighth-grade teachers participated in training to learn how to help J. by making meaningful modifications. The resource teacher became an unofficial mentor, always ready to give assistance on assignments. It took a group effort to help J. become a reader.

I am now at Post Elementary, continuing in a co-teach position. We've had our share of

successes this year—not MY successes, but OUR successes. The principal is always ready to listen to new ideas and find the money for materials and training sessions that meet our students' specific needs. Our APs and instructional specialists have given the fifth-grade team tremendous support with classroom management ideas and great strategies for building academic achievement. Our counselor, bless her heart, has responded to our concerns and stresses with humor and an endless supply of M&Ms.

Of course, I would have had no great teaching moments this year without the flexibility and

understanding of my general education co-teach partners, Misty Trujillo and John White. They have the ability to maintain focus on the needs of both the general and special-needs students. So much is required of these teachers, but their expectation for all our students to be successful never fails to motivate.

Thanks to all the wonderful gardeners at Post, we've seen many students thrive, grow, and bloom into better students. Because of this team effort, we are not spending time pulling out weeds but are nurturing a garden full of beautiful roses.

Succeeding Together

Naressa Govender K Carlton Pre-vocational Center K
Secondary Level K LIFE Skills

How could I have known being a substitute teacher at Carlton, a specialized school I had never heard of, would have such a significant impact on my life?

Carlton is not your typical educational setting. I never knew such a school existed, even though I graduated in 1993 from Cy-Fair High School, right next door to Carlton. Mental retardation, autism, speech impairments, and physical disabilities were all terms I had heard before, but I never had any first-hand experience with people who faced these challenges.

To say the least, my first day at Carlton was an eye-opener. I learned so much that day and the following days. The students had so many different types of needs; I had no idea how one person could teach them. I realized the reason Carlton was able to meet the various needs of the students was not because of one teacher, but because of a team.

After a year and a half of substitute teaching, I decided to become a special education teacher. My first year as a teacher I had six students. Each student was non-verbal, had limited to no mobility skills, and needed complete hands-on teaching. I had a principal who encouraged and supported me. I had a mentor teacher who

guided me, listened to me, and collaborated with me. I had paraprofessionals who directly worked with me in achieving the goals and objectives of my students. I had related-services personnel who taught me about communication devices, physical positioning, and finding ways to make students as independent as possible. Everyone worked closely together to enhance the life of a student.

I have stayed at Carlton, not only because of the rewarding experience of working with students with disabilities, but also because of the dedicated professionals I am privileged to work with each day—not only my fellow teachers, but also the principal, paraprofessionals, nurse, speech pathologist, physical therapist, occupational therapist, and music therapist. It is this team of people who have shared their specialized knowledge with me that has enabled me to build a strong foundation of teaching skills and has allowed me to be honored with the Spotlight teacher recognition.

I will continue to come together, share together, and work together with this team of professionals, so we can succeed together in bringing a quality educational program to students with disabilities.

Working Hand-in-hand Makes the Difference

Carrie Higgins K Willbern Elementary School K Grade 3 K
Language Arts and Social Studies K Social Studies Liaison

In second grade, I had a teacher who made a significant impression on me and started me on my path to becoming a teacher. I experienced first-hand how much she loved her students and enjoyed making a difference for them. I witnessed how she worked side-by-side with her fellow teachers to do the best for her students. Still today her influence inspires me to be the best teacher I can be.

Being chosen as a Willbern Spotlight teacher is such an honor. To work in a building with such talented and professional people is a privilege. My third-grade team is comprised of wonderful teachers who are always ready to lend each other a helping hand. We share strategies and ideas with each other and with our students and parents. Being a part of this team has taught me the importance of teamwork. Without teamwork we cannot make a difference in our students' lives. They are the most important part of our

job, and it is up to us, as teachers, to help them succeed.

I try to support the team and do my best for my students. It is rewarding when I can plan our team's social studies lessons for the week; I enjoy doing after-school tutoring, and I try always to be available to the other members of my team. For example, I have planned "emergency" lessons for teachers who may have an unexpected absence. I know it is important to the students that their teachers are happy and healthy, and, if I can do just a little bit to make that happen, then I feel I have done my part. It often looks as though I am overextended, but, to me, I am just contributing to my team.

It is a great honor to be part of a wonderful staff like the one at Willbern. Being named Spotlight teacher by my colleagues reinforces that feeling. I am a better teacher because of the examples that have been set for me over the years.

Sharing the Light

Jeanne Hughes K Copeland Elementary School K Grade 1

Our school's theme this year is "You light the way!" To be chosen as this year's Spotlight teacher is humbling in view of the fact that many of our teachers really do just that—light the way. I am only one of many.

I have always believed that to have a job is a blessing; but to have a job that you *enjoy* is a gift beyond measure. That is the way I feel about being a teacher. What a gift!

Yes, there are good days, and there are hard days, but there is a knowing deep within that I am doing the very thing I was created to do. And I am thankful. But it isn't really just about me. I look around and see all of the people in my life who have helped me become the teacher I am today. John Donne's famous line, "No man is an island, entire of itself" is one of my favorite quotes.

In my opinion, that statement is never truer than in the field of teaching. A smile, a hug, an encouraging word, a listening ear—some are given, others are received and then passed on from one to another, again and again.

Those I work with have enriched my life in many ways. Each one has had his/her part in shaping who I am.

- my mentor teacher, Valerie Manton, who gave me such a solid foundation as I was "learning the ropes"
- my first-grade team, who works long hours with me as we plan for our students
- the other teachers and paras, who bring out the best in each of us
- the office staff, who helps to keep our school running smoothly

- the administrators, who give me strength and support
 - the custodians, who so willingly serve us each day
- I can honestly say that I have been touched in some way by each of them. We all make a

difference. None is exempt. All are of great value. That is why, if I could, I'd like to move that spotlight back just a bit so that it can shine on our entire school. Copeland staff, you really do "light the way!"

"Never Volunteer" Not True at Holmsley

John Michael Sturgill K Holmsley Elementary School K Grade
5 Math K Technology Liaison

When I first started college, I was undecided about what job I should prepare to do for the rest of my life. Because I grew up in a family supported by my mother, who taught school, I considered becoming a teacher.

Instead, I elected to join the Army ROTC program and became an Army officer. I served for twenty years and retired in 1996. In the Army you quickly learn the importance of teamwork, cooperation, and pulling together to accomplish the mission. The old adage "never volunteer for anything" is not really true in the Army.

While attending the University of Houston to become certified as a teacher, I discovered it was not really true in education, either. It was in my teacher certification classes that I first encountered the same spirit of teamwork and cooperation that I had experienced in the Army. If not for volunteers, I would not be here today. Professors, mentor teachers, and fellow students were always willing to help, share ideas, and provide advice and assistance.

After completing the coursework, I started an internship program and entered my first classroom as a teacher. I look back on those first days in my own classroom and realize how fortunate I was to be part of a team with so many supportive people to help me through some difficult times. My mentor teacher was especially helpful, and I will always be grateful to him for volunteering to help me learn from my mistakes and encouraging me to continue developing my teaching skills. I like to think that those skills have greatly improved during the last eight years.

When I interviewed for a teaching position at Holmsley Elementary four years ago, I knew right away that this was the school where I wanted to teach. I was made to feel a part of the team and welcomed into the Holmsley family. I could not have asked to work with a better group of

professional educators. We pull together with the common goal of providing a quality education to each of our students. Coupled with that goal is the supportive and cooperative interaction that each teacher, support person, and administrator provides for each member of the staff.

As liaison for technology and Pinnacle, I work with almost every teacher in the building at one time or another. I see first-hand the support and teamwork provided by the staff to one another and to our children. We work together with our parents to ensure open communication between the school and home. Parent volunteers conduct fund-raisers, put up bulletin boards, tutor students, and help with all aspects of running our school. Our students know they are an important part of our team and realize that their success is a reflection of a team effort.

When I was notified of my nomination for Spotlight teacher, I was very humbled and felt undeserving to be selected from a group of so many outstanding educators. The many congratulations and positive comments from the staff at Holmsley made me proud to be part of our team and family. I realize that everything I am and have been able to accomplish is because we pull together and support each other. Everyone volunteers to help when he or she sees a need.

Each and every individual at Holmsley is a team player and exemplifies the spirit of cooperation found in the district's "Portrait of a Teacher." I am happy to have been selected to represent the very professional group of teachers and support staff at Holmsley, and I will not forget that they are responsible for this recognition. "Never volunteer for anything" is a thought that never enters your mind when you work at Holmsley Elementary.

Online Version

This publication—along with **Spotlight** editions from some previous years—may be viewed online by visiting the Web site of Cypress-Fairbanks I.S.D.

Instructions:

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From the list on the left side of the screen, click on “Departments.”

Click on “Curriculum & Instruction.”

On the “General Information” list, find “Spotlight Teachers.”

Click a year.

Index by Campus

Elementary Schools

Adam	31
Ault	20
Bane	22
Bang	20
Birkes.....	6
Copeland	34
Emmott	5
Farney	12
Fiest.....	14
Francone	26
Frazier	5
Gleason	29
Hairgrove	3
Hamilton	22
Hancock.....	24
Holbrook	1
Holmsley.....	35
Horne.....	19
Jowell.....	10
Kirk	6
Lamkin	7
Lieder.....	4
Lowery	18
Matzke	11
Metcalf	11
Millsap	23
Moore	32
Owens	9
Post	32
Reed.....	28
Robison	9
Sampson	28
Sheridan	15
Tipps.....	13
Walker	23
Willbern.....	21, 33
Wilson.....	11
Yeager.....	10

Middle Schools

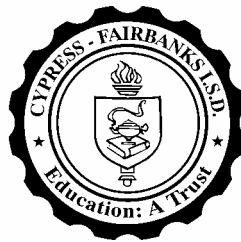
Aragon	17
Arnold.....	8
Bleyl	29
Campbell.....	17
Cook.....	19
Dean	27
Goodson	1
Hamilton	12
Labay	27
Thornton.....	30
Truitt.....	7
Watkins	15

High Schools

Cy-Fair	8
Cypress Creek	24
Cypress Falls	5
Cypress Ridge.....	26
Cypress Springs.....	25
Jersey Village.....	13
Langham Creek.....	21
Windfern.....	3

Special Assignment Schools

Adaptive Behavior Center	18
Alternative Learning Center.....	14
Carlton Pre-vocational Center	33



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