



# Spotlight

Volume XXIII ♦ May, 2008

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# Table of Contents

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## **The Spotlight Teacher Award** **6**

### **Instructional Strategist**

Kim Hawkins .....	All for One, One for All! .....	7
Marla Meehan.....	Plan for Success .....	7
Taara Moore.....	Strategies for Success .....	8
Traci L. Tousant.....	Success Comes in “Cans,” Not in “Cannots”! .....	9

### **Creator of Student-centered Environment**

Amy Abramowitz .....	This Is It! .....	10
Andrea E. Barnes .....	Pep-Pep Hurrah! .....	10
DeAnn H. Bennett .....	Being Consistent .....	11
Monte Bingham .....	To Me and through Me .....	12
Kimberly Birkelbach .....	Growing with Class.....	12
Hank Brennan .....	Technology + Fun = Success.....	13
Melanie Clark .....	Expect the Best .....	14
Melissa Dickey.....	Autonomous Thinkers.....	14
Stacey Gaecke .....	Capturing Their Hearts and Minds.....	15
Carol Goldapp .....	Caterpillars to Butterflies .....	15
Amy Hawkins .....	Out of the Nest .....	16
Jill Johnson .....	Are You Coming to Pick Me Up Today? .....	17
Laura LaBounty .....	Everyone Has the Potential to Be Phenomenal .....	17
Cathi Lucy .....	Home Away from Home .....	18
Anita Marshall .....	Creating a Challenge .....	18
Carrie McCollister.....	Oh, My Stars! .....	19
Janice McSpadden.....	I Am a Teacher .....	20
Patricia Myers .....	The Power to Inspire .....	20
Jeanna Peña, M.Ed.....	Humility, Patience, and Vision .....	21
Marilyn Rasmussen .....	A Moment of Inspiration .....	21
Karen Stewart .....	Maximizing Potential.....	22
Lisa Watson .....	We Are a Family .....	23
Tresa Weisz .....	I Wonder .....	23
Alane Williams.....	Acceptance .....	24
Sheila Wratchford .....	To Create .....	25

### **Positive Role Model**

Cathy Briggs .....	Those Who Can—Teach.....	26
Margie Comstock .....	A Shot Heard around the World .....	26

Kirk Eaton .....	The Numbers and Mrs. Rosen .....	27
Cathryn Fellenz .....	Live with Integrity .....	28
Susan Fennis .....	Destined to Teach .....	28
Nydia Aguero Garcia.....	Inspired to Change.....	29
Amanda Garrett.....	You Have <i>How Many</i> Children?.....	29
Johnnetta (Pat) Huff..	Patience + Compassion = Lasting Impact .....	30
Stephanie Lyle .....	Center Stage.....	31
Mary Marsh.....	These Many Years... ..	31
Pam Michaelis .....	The Kind of Teacher I Want to Be.....	32
Thao Tran Nguyen .....	Our Greatest Contribution.....	32
Frank (Coach) Patterson .....	A Coach Is Born.....	33
Connye Roberson.....	Oh...You Have <i>Him</i> in Your Class!.....	34
Sandra Silvey.....	It's All about Relationships .....	34
Christina Stout .....	Home Away from Home .....	35
Kelly Strauss.....	Truly Special Stars.....	35
Anton Truong .....	What I've Learned .....	36
Dawn Tryon .....	Relationships, Baby!.....	37
Vicky Vest .....	The Stolen Chalk .....	37
Lisa White .....	Keeping It in the Family .....	38
Donna Woods.....	It Takes a Village.....	38
Laurie Worchesik .....	Big Shoes to Fill.....	39
Yanine Zambrano .....	Vision.....	40

### **Lifelong Learner**

Donna Christy .....	A Heart for Children .....	41
Tayaka Daniels .....	A Vision of Learning .....	41
Krista Dankert.....	Today Is a Great Day to Learn Something New.....	42
Lisa Fasan .....	No Excuses! .....	43
Shannon Garton .....	Ah-ha! .....	43
Tiffany Holomon .....	What a Wonderful World .....	44
Sherry A. Johnson.....	The Perpetual Student .....	44
Kandace Kitchen.....	Learning Starts at Home.....	45
Kristie Lambert.....	Unexpected Inspirations .....	45
Vickey Morgan.....	Art from the Heart .....	46
Melissa Morrow.....	Lifelong Readers .....	47
Dana Palmer .....	The Gift of Learning .....	47
Kathy Pena .....	Thank You, Donny!.....	48
Heather Wilde .....	My First Real Lesson.....	48
Debbie Winkelmann .....	A Serendipitous Journey .....	49
Terri Womack.....	It Just Keeps Getting Better .....	49
Frederick Young, Jr. ....	What I Learned to Love .....	50

**Team Player**

Patti Arechiga..... Gym Rat..... 52  
Amy Moore ..... Many as One..... 52  
Julia A. Todd ..... The Perfect Winning Combination..... 53  
Elissa Wells..... How Can I Help? ..... 54

**Index by Campus**

**56**

# The Spotlight Teacher Award

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What does it mean to be an exemplary teacher? The district's *Portrait of a CFISD Teacher* describes these characteristics.

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

CFISD's annual *Spotlight* program—now in its 23<sup>rd</sup> 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.

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 in reminding us that we are not dealing with statistics, but with human beings—children—and that each one is special.

The narratives that follow were submitted by the 2008 *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

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*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.*

## **All for One, One for All!**

**Kim Hawkins ♦ Black Elementary School  
Grade 4 ♦ Language Arts and Social Studies**

I look forward to the kickoff of each new season. My family and friends will tell you that I am a highly competitive person who strives to win at everything I do. When I decided that teaching was to be my sport in life, believe me when I say, I had no idea the arena of challenges I would be up against.

As a teacher, I get the chance every day to coach the best players in the game, my students. Everyone wants to be part of a winning team, and it is my job to get them in the game. Once they learn to use their strengths and practice strategies to overcome obstacles, my students begin to notice the others cheering for them to reach their goals. With positive modeling and motivation for each child, the individuals create a

team, students becoming responsible not only for themselves, but for the success of the classroom. Believe it or not, in this competitive environment, learning is challenging, learning is respected, and learning is *expected*. Encouraging them to believe in themselves and finding the best game plan allow me to help students reach their personal and academic goals. Knowing that we are all counting on them to participate every day makes students feel they are valuable and needed. And this expectation is the same for me. I have students who count on me. So every day, you will find me on the sidelines coaching my team to a *win!*

## **Plan for Success**

**Marla Meehan ♦ Windfern High School  
Math Models with Applications ♦ Algebra II ♦ Precalculus**

I teach higher-level mathematics, a subject famous, or perhaps infamous, for the level of anxiety it causes. Each semester, there are one or more students who, for the first time, realize they are "smart."

They realize that, when they work hard, they can accomplish something that is meaningful, something difficult that they always felt was out of their reach.

I love to see that proud smile and the light in that student's eyes. In some cases, this event might be the first positive boost to the student's ego, the first real educational success he has experienced.

But this kind of success doesn't happen accidentally. It takes patience and perseverance. It takes a careful strategy that can be executed purposefully by both teacher and student. To paraphrase the poet Robert

Burns, even the best-laid plans often go awry.

And so each day, I enter the classroom with a plan to be successful. On some days, the plan may indeed go awry, but even a single success proves the pudding.

For this reason, the message in my classroom is, "Yes, this is hard. Yes, you will do it. Yes, you will be so proud of yourself when you have done it."

## Strategies for Success

Taara Moore ♦ Bang Elementary School  
Grades 1-5 ♦ Reading Enrichment

*Dear Mrs. Moore,  
I know you worked hard to teach me.  
Thank you.*

*Love,  
J.*

In early August, I found that tattered, eraser-stained letter from J. Memories of him and countless other first graders are etched in my mind. For 13 years, I taught first graders at Bang. I was part of a phenomenal team that worked hard to develop strong readers.

Teaching Reading Enrichment this year brought with it an excitement to share the same reading joy with first through fifth graders. I found many pathways for motivation and making connections with students. At times, these connections went beyond the texts they were reading...connections to classwork, their reading lives, hobbies,

and friends, to name a few. Some days connecting meant learning about their newest library book and using these topics to motivate students to read. Making connections to what their wonderful classroom teachers were teaching helped them, too.

I modeled strategies that good readers use and provided many opportunities for the students to practice. Strategies for "living above the line" often became the topic when I asked about homework, studying, or work habits.

What a joy it has been to see success and hear reactions like, "I've got this!" or "This book reminds me of one we read last week!" These responses gave me the same affirmation that J.'s tattered letter had provided. Such words keep me passionate about teaching reading and connecting with my students so they develop trust, confidence, and strategies to succeed!

## Success Comes in “Cans,” Not in “Cannots”!

Traci L. Tousant ♦ Lee Elementary School  
Grade 3 ♦ Language Arts and Social Studies

For five years I've posted a banner in my classroom that says, “Success comes in *cans*, not in *cannots*.” I've used it as a motivator for my students. Last year, however, I was the one who needed to be reminded of what it takes to be successful. At the beginning of the year, a student entered my first-grade classroom, unable to identify all of his letters and sounds. For a brief time, I thought, “There's no way he'll be on-level by the end of the year.”

When I looked at the banner, I realized that to teach my students what it took to be successful, I had to be the model for them. In the classroom, we created a “Success” wall underneath the banner. We titled it “Look What I've

Achieved!” I made posters charting students' progress in two categories—high-frequency words and reading fluency. There was a chart for every student to sign. As students reached the next level, they would cross their name out and add it to the next chart.

A particular student was pumped up to see his improvement marked on the charts. We started focusing on how many charts he could cross his name off of, signaling that he had reached the next achievement level. At the end of the year, we made our goal. He left first grade reading on grade level. His progress just proved that success does come in the “cans,” not in the “cannots.”

# Creator of Student-centered Environment

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*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.*

## **This Is It!**

**Amy Abramowitz ♦ Farney Elementary School  
Grade 5 ♦ Math and Science**

One of my favorite keys of excellence is "This Is It." This motto reminds me of the scene in *Dead Poets' Society* when Robin Williams speaks to his new students, "*Carpe diem!* Seize the day, boys! Make your lives extraordinary!"

You have to take each and every opportunity to live in the moment: acknowledge and accept where we are, in both good times and challenging times. I teach my kids that they must have the attitude of "I can, I will, I must." In life, remember that you pass this way only once! Let's live life to the fullest and give it our best.

One of my former students had the hardest time passing her tests, and it always broke my heart to see the look

in her eyes when we would discuss her results. I reminded her of her great improvement from a 35 on the first benchmark to a 58 on the second one. I observed a glimmer of hope in her eyes as she saw great strides in her performance. I continued to work closely with her, and she finally passed the next test. All it took was some encouragement and praising even the smallest of efforts to slowly build up her self-confidence.

Though all students have the ability to be great, many of them are unaware of their potential. When we help them realize the possibilities that lie within their reach, we as teachers feel successful. This result is what teaching is all about. "This Is It!"

## **Pep-Pep Hurrah!**

**Andrea E. Barnes ♦ Aragon Middle School  
Grades 7-8 ♦ READ 180**

I teach students who are involved in the *READ 180* program at Aragon Middle School. Many of my students have struggled to be successful readers in school. My passion has always been to make a difference in the lives of my students by showing that I believe in

them and that they can believe in themselves. A few years ago, an idea was born as I tried to get the students confident about TAKS! We created a TAKS pep rally where students could show off their own talents and abilities. Some students sang, some read

inspirational poems, some danced or cheered, some lip-synced, and some wrote original rap lyrics to perform.

These students gained positive school-wide attention through their performances. Every student had a role to fulfill from creating and sending out invitations, to writing the program, to organizing the rally. It was totally student-led. That first year was a rousing success, and with each year the rally has grown. It brings kids together who would not normally associate with one another outside of school hours.

Students, teachers, administrators, and parents attend.

One student commented, "Ms. Barnes, the rally is the talk of the school today." Since the rallies began, my students have approached the TAKS test with increasing levels of enthusiasm. Many students have passed and have made their highest scores! I feel that my *READ 180* students have learned to shine in the classroom and beyond because they know someone really cares.

## Being Consistent

**DeAnn H. Bennett ♦ André Elementary School  
Grade 2 ♦ Language Arts and Social Studies**

As school begins each year, the first few weeks are critical when it comes to implementing rules and procedures for my classroom. I've realized through my 12 years in education that rules and procedures can't be briefly taught at the beginning of the year. Teaching them is an ongoing process.

I remember my first year as a teacher. I discussed my expectations with the class the first week of school. I assumed that they understood them, so I began teaching. I was shocked to see inappropriate behavior occurring (like students getting out of their seats without permission and not working quietly during workstations). I started to panic. I repeatedly revised my rules and procedures rather than enforcing them consistently. Basically, I gave my students permission to run my class the remainder of the year.

With time, I've improved in classroom management, showing students through drama how I want rules and procedures to be carried out in my classroom. I believe no classroom operates smoothly without rules and procedures that are carefully planned and implemented effectively.

Consistent implementation gives students

- ♦ independence in completing a variety of academic tasks successfully;
- ♦ fewer opportunities to become disruptive or behave inappropriately;
- ♦ a sense of safety in the classroom; and
- ♦ a positive attitude about learning.

As each new student walks into my classroom, I want him or her to know my expectations. I want them to be the best that they can be, and I remind them that "practice makes perfect."

**To Me and through Me**  
**Monte Bingham ♦ Watkins Middle School**  
**Grade 7 ♦ Language Arts**

My two biggest teaching strengths, love of content and flexibility, had their origins when I was 17. I have fond recollections of two wonderful teachers who taught brilliantly and, unbeknownst to them, helped shape my teaching style.

Frau Selman, my German teacher, possessed a joy about the German language that was unparalleled. When she taught, I knew that she liked the subject matter. When I saw her happiness, I was enraptured. I learned well and enjoyed learning. I have that same love towards teaching language arts. I remember the infectious enthusiasm with which Frau taught, and I try to keep that spirit alive in every lesson I teach.

Mrs. Hill, my English teacher, was also exemplary. As the type of student who pushed the limits of assignments, I

would often ask, “Can I do it this way instead?” Undaunted by repeated negatives from other teachers, I asked Mrs. Hill if my research paper on British literature could be about the British invasion of rock ‘n’ roll. She responded with a shocking, “Yes!”

I wrote my best research paper yet. I loved every book read and every word written. It was Mrs. Hill’s flexibility in giving me ownership of the assignment that inspired me to excel. I remember this project fondly, and I always try to be flexible with assignments in order to allow students to find themselves in the given task.

And, though my high school graduation is years behind me, the lessons of these great teachers are still being taught—to me and, I hope, through me.

**Growing with Class**  
**Kimberly Birkelbach ♦ Warner Elementary School**  
**Grade 1 ♦ Core Academic Subjects**

In every profession, individuals must draw inspiration from education, observation, and experience to grow in the choices we call “careers.”

The inspiration in my “career” comes from the students comprising the many classes I have had the privilege of guiding during my 14 years as an educator. The unique opportunity to grow as a person and teammate through these daily lessons has molded me into the educator I am today.

During my first few years, it was the students’ willingness to confront their own challenges that motivated me to strive for improved methods of teaching. As time went on, I realized that by reaching out and touching each student through an interactive, positive environment the collective group I called a “class” was growing. And I grew with them. Finding positives on those tough teaching days was especially rewarding as I watched my

students' reactions when the final connection was made to a particular lesson.

Throughout my teaching career, I have had the privilege of working with talented educators, involved administrative teams, and supportive parents. From these groups, I have been able to openly share ideas and strategies to further develop my skills in molding my classroom environment.

In careers, success is measured by rewards. And my rewards are many, especially the positive remarks.

- ◆ "You're the best teacher!"
- ◆ "Thanks for teaching me!"
- ◆ "I get it!"

Hearing these responses (accompanied by the laughs and smiles) is the reason why being a teacher is not what I *do*, but who I *am*.

## **Technology + Fun = Success**

**Hank Brennan ♦ Jowell Elementary School**

**Grade 4 ♦ Structured English Immersion ♦ Math and Science**

One strategy I enjoy incorporating in the classroom is friendly competition. I mix sports activities along with the lesson so the students are entertained and motivated as they learn. I also have a wall called "The Wall of Fame." Once a student masters a certain level of the multiplication facts, his or her picture goes up on the wall. The students are eager to be the next picture added, so they study extra-hard to learn their multiplication facts. This incentive makes learning fun for them and makes them feel that they've accomplished a huge goal.

My favorite resource is the SMART Board. As simple as it seems, I have to say this resource has been instrumental in my teaching and motivating. Regardless of what topic I am covering, the students really enjoy using the

SMART Board. I test their knowledge on it with activities such as science "Jeopardy" and math races. When I ask for volunteers to come up to the front of the class and work on a math problem or science question, most students raise their hands.

I try very hard to intertwine technology and fun learning in all my lessons. I've always wanted to help children succeed academically, but nothing prepared me for how complete I would feel professionally after seeing the students grasp a topic they had struggled so hard to master.

Teaching is the most rewarding and inspiring career I have ever had. I am grateful to have been given the opportunity to inspire students and be part of their journey to success.

## **Expect the Best**

**Melanie Clark ♦ Bane Elementary School**

**Grade 5 ♦ Structured English Immersion ♦ Math and Science**

As I approach each new group of learners every fall, my first concern is promoting students' active engagement in their own learning outcomes. Using Quantum Learning strategies, I help the students to become successful by allowing them to be full participants in all classroom activities.

The first step to getting the students to care and value learning is to build a personal relationship with each student from the very beginning. I develop a bond with every student that encourages him or her to take risks without fear and to accept challenges with eagerness. We become a

successful learning family in which everyone feels safe and valued.

The next step is to develop lessons that provide students with hands-on experiences that are aligned with the curriculum. Relating their learning to real-life experiences makes the learning purposeful.

Finally, believing in my students' potential helps them find the motivation and effort necessary to succeed. The popular adage, "They will live up to—or down to—your expectations" is true. By demonstrating faith in my students' abilities and setting high expectations, I am able to watch my students soar.

## **Autonomous Thinkers**

**Melissa Dickey ♦ Copeland Elementary School**

**Grade 5 ♦ Language Arts and Social Studies**

I believe that the most important element in the development of a child is a positive environment that produces autonomous thinkers. A positive environment yields an ideal setting for children to learn and grow. It is important for children to feel that they have the freedom to explore, think, and, constantly, question.

Each year I set up a classroom environment that allows children to develop their critical thinking skills. I set the children up for success early-on, and I continually encourage them to challenge not only their way of thinking but also mine.

I, therefore, use the devil's-advocate approach to teaching quite often. This

tactic forces the children to rely on sources other than me once instruction has been given, to make them evaluate their thought process. The children begin to grow in self-confidence, so they increase their retention of the information that is given.

Another key element in producing an ideal setting for learning is allowing them to feel that the classroom is theirs. I encourage a feeling of community in the room to allow the children to take ownership of the environment and, in return, their learning.

Students also begin to nurture and take care of each other. They begin to solve problems independently of me,

which is my ultimate goal. By the year's end, my class has evolved from

timid students to outgoing thinkers and problem solvers.

## Capturing Their Hearts and Minds

Stacey Gaecke ♦ Lowery Elementary School

Grade 1 ♦ Core Academic Subjects

*They may forget what you said, but they will never forget how you made them feel.*

—Carl W. Buechner

I was so thrilled when I was given the opportunity to attend a session of the “Capturing Kids’ Hearts” training last summer. I had a confirmation of what I already knew was my God-given passion...building relationships.

I thrive on building relationships with my students and their families. They know me—the *real* me. They know all about

- ♦ my husband, who is also their fabulous physical education teacher;
- ♦ my sons Beau and Jake; and
- ♦ my new Westie puppy named Gracie.

They know all about our lives and activities.

But this openness works both ways—I also *know* my students. I know more than just their reading levels and their writing abilities (which are important). I know who plays baseball, and I try to make it to a game. I know which movies and video games they are currently obsessed with and who their friends are.

And I know their families. Many of my students’ parents call me regularly just to ask a question or discuss a concern. Some people think that’s crazy, but I don’t! That is the kind of relationship and communication I want to have with my students and their families. They know they are loved and valued by me.

It is a true joy to watch my first graders learn to read and write, but an even greater joy to me comes when my students or their families return years later to express thanks that I made a difference by investing in their lives.

## Caterpillars to Butterflies

Carol Goldapp ♦ Lieder Elementary School

Grade 3 ♦ English as a Second Language ♦ Language Arts and Social Studies

As a child, I was shy and timid. Normal, everyday things didn’t come easily to me. I spent days running from my younger brother, who would delight in being able to tease me with a frog he caught after a summer rain. I was a caterpillar from a very early age.

In school, I remember many acts of kindness by my teachers, but I don’t remember being encouraged to participate in school activities or overcome my shyness. As a caterpillar, I was a perfect student. I never spoke out or got into trouble. What my

teachers didn't know was that I wanted to be outgoing and popular.

I loved sports but was always picked last when teams were chosen. I loved singing and wanted to be in the choir, but when I tried out, I froze and could not sing a note. I wanted to confidently raise my hand and answer the teachers' questions, but always hesitated and let someone else respond. I wanted to be a butterfly.

When I became a teacher, I brought all of those experiences with me.

Within the first two days of school, I can tell how many of my kids are caterpillars. I immediately start trying to build confidence and praise them for participating (even when their answers are wrong). Getting my kids to try is not only my biggest challenge, but also the reason my greatest successes are taking my little caterpillars and giving them every chance to grow wings and fly.

## **Out of the Nest**

**Amy Hawkins ♦ Cypress Springs High School  
Grade 11 ♦ English III AP/K/SSL ♦ Department Chair**

One of my favorite pastimes, the closest thing I have to a hobby, is watching birds in my backyard. Occasionally, I have had the rare privilege of watching a baby bird leave the nest and learn to fly, a sight at once humbling and amazing.

As a high school teacher, I have many opportunities to observe my students getting their wings and flying on their own. In fact, watching these six-foot-tall baby birds spread their wings makes me as proud as any mama blue jay. It is my greatest hope as a teacher to impart the lessons of self-reliance, confidence, and skill to my students, and throughout the years I have not been disappointed.

There was the student I'll call "Ben," a troubled kid who had witnessed his father murder his mother. He sat in the back of my eleventh-grade English class not speaking for the first six-weeks of school. I asked him to take a part in the play we were reading, and he hesitated, but did what I asked.

Over the course of the year, I saw Ben's wings grow stronger as he made friends and continued to participate in class, using writing as a creative outlet. An accomplished artist, Ben was astonished when his entire English class came to his one-man art show. Eventually, Ben moved to Colorado to open his own snowmobile business. Not only did he leave the nest, he soared with the eagles.

## **Are You Coming to Pick Me Up Today?**

**Jill Johnson ♦ Danish Elementary School  
Grades 3-5 ♦ Reading Enrichment**

“Mrs. Johnson, are you coming to pick me up today?” These words— inquiries from students scheduled to meet with me later—are undeniably some of the best words I hear all day. As I am going down the hall, coming from bus duty, or taking back another Reading Enrichment group, I inevitably get asked this question. I must admit, it gives me quite a boost when I have just completed a session with a particularly struggling group.

The fact that these students have such determination and strength to conquer their difficulty in reading is truly inspiring to me. Sitting down with a small group of students who struggle with the challenge of reading and witnessing their progress is amazing—and a lot of fun!

What a tremendous privilege it is to get to experience a job in which you are taught a life lesson on a daily basis. Every day, I watch students conquer their fear of reading aloud, their uncertainty in understanding a story, or their lack of self-confidence. Through motivation and determination, they persevere, and I gladly accept the challenge of helping them win their academic battle.

Teaching is not only a gift, but a real sense of accomplishment for the student as well as the teacher. So, every day when I am asked that question, it always makes me smile and enthusiastically reply, “Of course I am coming to get you. I wouldn’t miss it!”

## **Everyone Has the Potential to Be Phenomenal**

**Laura LaBounty ♦ Spillane Middle School  
Grades 7-8 ♦ Math ♦ Special Education Department Chair**

Imagine this... Students walk into a math classroom as upbeat music is playing. They immediately feel at home and leave their troubles at the door. The bell rings. The music stops, and the class begins its opening tradition—a clap, intended to energize and create a focus. Another song begins to play, and students become involved in the day’s warm-up. At the song’s end, two teachers facilitate as students share different strategies, ask each other for clarification, and sometimes even politely “argue” about the math.

This routine exists because the students feel safe as risk-takers in this environment. No matter what their background, students are performing at their personal best and taking ownership for their learning. This collaboration permeates throughout the room the entire period.

Now imagine this... Many students in this room have learning disabilities.

What is it about this classroom that enables all students to experience success? Two words: Quantum Teaching. With a background in special

education, I had already undergone training detailing how to work with students who have learning disabilities. I put as much of this training into play as I could, but it was not until I became trained in Quantum Learning techniques that I actually learned the *why* behind these strategies.

It was the knowledge of the *why* that has catapulted me into greater heights as an educator, and my students' learning has catapulted also. I have also found that sharing the *why* with my students creates buy-in. Buy-in creates ownership, and ownership creates success!

## Home Away from Home

Cathi Lucy ♦ Holmsley Elementary School

Kindergarten ♦ English as a Second Language ♦ Core Academic Subjects

Holmsley Elementary has been my home away from home for the past 15 years. It's amazing to think back on all the children that I have had the privilege of getting to know through the years. I believe that there was a reason each one of those children walked through my door. When they came into my class, I wanted them to feel special and part of another family—a safe and comfortable “home away from home” family—where they felt accepted, supported, and cared about.

Each year, I anticipate the new crop of young kindergartners. They are filled with the same emotions I am (and a few others!), and we quickly start melding into a “family.” Students learn

that they are the problem solvers, and they are the ones who are responsible for their own learning.

At such a young age, it's a powerful message. Many take on the challenge easily, while others are contented to wait until later on in the year. They feel good about tackling new learning because they are allowed to make mistakes, progress at their own rates, and celebrate their achievements.

I believe being an educator of young children is one of the most important jobs one can be called into. We are true “difference-makers” in the lives of our students. And what better place to accomplish that than in a home away from home.

## Creating a Challenge

Anita Marshall ♦ Cypress Creek High School

Integrated Physics & Chemistry ♦ Science Department Chair

My high school Genetics teacher warned us on the first day of class about the big fruit-fly project. This assignment, along with other such activities throughout the course, was certainly a challenge for me, and it encouraged me to stretch my comfort

zone as a student. I was fortunate to have had several such teachers during my high school years.

Now, as a teacher myself, I attempt to provide thought-provoking activities for my students.

- ◆ I might be sitting with the class on the floor designing waves with Slinkys, ropes, and strings.
- ◆ Maybe we're reviewing questions on the most recent Secondary Formative Assessment and relating them back to our classroom activities.
- ◆ We could be in the hall building roller coasters with foam in our energy unit.
- ◆ Students might be trying to pry the secret contents of the density bottles from me. (I tell them they won't find out until the end of the year, but they keep asking!)

- ◆ We could be studying the refraction of light waves and making a glass beaker disappear.

Just recently, I challenged my students to explain why—when held over a flame—a water-filled balloon didn't break, but an air-filled one did. This experiment definitely stretched my students' comfort zone and provided a great challenge!

Some ninth-grade students have a very small comfort zone for science content. By utilizing challenging, thought-provoking activities, I attempt to reach my students where they are and extend their science experiences so that they can relate course content to their own lives.

## **Oh, My Stars!**

**Carrie McCollister ♦ Birkes Elementary School  
Grade 3 ♦ Math and Science**

Stars. We've been told to reach for them, wish on them, and shine like them. My classroom is filled with over a hundred star decorations. I'll admit that I'm a little obsessed.

Why am I drawn to and fascinated by stars? They have such a positive connotation. Stars are bright, shiny, sparkly, and inspirational. Stars are associated with hopes, wishes, dreams, and successes. I want every single one of my students to feel like a star.

One of my goals as an educator is to make sure that children experience success. Another goal of mine is to inspire my students to dream big and to take risks. Yes, I teach math and

science, but, first and foremost, I teach children.

At the beginning of the year, some of the students think my star obsession is a little strange (I don't really blame them); however, by the end of the year they get it. My students are the true stars in the classroom. They've worked hard and achieved goals.

I want my students to sparkle in the successes that they achieve. I want my students to be an inspiration to others around them. I want my students to shine in the challenges that will come their way. I feel honored to be a part of their journey as they discover that the stars are within their reach.

## **I Am a Teacher**

**Janice McSpadden ♦ Hamilton Elementary School  
Grade 4 ♦ Math and Science**

I am a teacher. I am not the teacher I was 30 years ago, because as I have been teaching, I have been continuously learning. I have learned from my friends and fellow teachers, from my principals, and from district staff development sessions—but, most of all, I have learned from my students. They have taught me to keep my sense of humor, to be humble, and to acknowledge and learn from my mistakes.

Each year, we become a team—a learning team. My students know that we are all on the same team. We win together, and we lose together. Their successes are my successes. Their failures are my failures. We are in it

together! As team members, we all feel at ease. We are not afraid to take risks. We may be wrong at times, but we learn from our mistakes. We listen to each other. We care about each other, and we want everyone on our team to succeed.

This past fall, as my class and I were going to lunch, we passed some of my former students. Their waves, greetings, and smiles were warm and enthusiastic. A young man in this year's class said, "Gee, Mrs. McSpadden, your students from last year really love you." I didn't even hesitate as I replied, "That's because I love them!" I am a teacher.

## **The Power to Inspire**

**Patricia Myers ♦ Hairgrove Elementary School  
Reading Enrichment**

Twenty-one years ago, my parents, Donna and Johnny Retano, gave me the chance to teach in their privately owned preschool in a small, rural town. That experience would become a turning point in my life.

My mother's honored reputation as a child advocate in the community was the driving force behind her success. She enthusiastically embraced my vision for our preschool—a warm, nurturing environment where children learned by "doing"; respected each other; developed a love for music, drama, and books; and exercised their curiosity.

Although I stretched her budget to the seams, my mom loved the bright, sunny classroom filled with laughter, Raffi songs, puppets, paints, experiments, and play. We both enjoyed being with these children—listening to their stories and dreams and watching them effortlessly gain self-confidence. Most of all, we read throughout the day—every day. These experiences became the catalyst for my moving into public school 17 years ago.

I've approached every teaching assignment since—second through fifth grades, Reading Recovery, and Reading Enrichment—with the same

philosophical foundation: Children learn best by “doing,” and learning shouldn’t be tedious or difficult—just one small step at a time. Developing a love for reading is the single most important gift a primary teacher can give students.

I will forever be grateful to my mom and dad for allowing me to create a learning climate and develop a belief system to inspire young learners. These tenets have been the defining factors in my educational philosophy through the years.

## **Humility, Patience, and Vision**

**Jeanna Peña, M.Ed. ♦ McFee Elementary School  
Grade 1 ♦ Bilingual ♦ Core Academic Subjects**

*Education is the kindling of a flame,  
not the filling of a vessel.*  
—Socrates

It was my first year teaching. I was given the extreme privilege of taking over a fourth-grade bilingual class in the middle of the school year. These beautiful children, most of whom were the same size as I was, welcomed me with wide eyes and cautious but outstretched arms. I was grateful, excited, anxious, and overwhelmed all at the same time. Apparently, so were they. And they made it known from the start that I had more to learn from them than they did from me: humility, patience, and vision.

Our one little class had children from 15 different countries. In short, we were the United Nations! I saw great

opportunity to teach, to embrace all of their collective experiences, and to allow them to learn from each other. As with all learners, what I presented had to be meaningful to them in all aspects, whether cognitively, socially, culturally, emotionally, linguistically, or otherwise.

One of the most amazing outcomes was that not only did we achieve success on an academic level, but the students really cared about their future, they cared about each other, and they wanted to leave this world a better place than they found it. They had a great sense of belonging and an amazing sense of pride. They drew from their cultural strengths and diversity to show everyone around them that no matter who you are, where you come from, or what color your skin is, you can contribute, and you can achieve great things.

## **A Moment of Inspiration**

**Marilyn Rasmussen ♦ Cy-Fair High School  
Grade 10 ♦ English II ♦ Team Leader**

As a leader of Cy-Fair High School’s team for the “Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports” program (PBIS), I experienced a moment of

inspiration during our staff development. Our team of administrators and teachers had worked together for several years, but we

hardly knew one another, except for the occasional exchange of pleasantries in the teacher workroom.

The team had three days of training and three days of meetings to plan our staff development, setting the tone for the entire school year. During the process, we were nervous about training our colleagues, but we looked forward to our time together. We created plans, prepared materials, and wrote silly skits, growing to know and trust each other.

After all the planning and worrying, we were ready for the first day. Waiting backstage, we giggled with nervous excitement. Finally, the process began with a skit, spoofing a typical day in the teacher workroom. During these days,

teachers enthusiastically accepted the concepts while I glimpsed the power of professional harmony.

At the closing, as the entire faculty stood arm-in-arm and sang our school song, I understood the true meaning of our profession. We are not just English or math teachers, but we are teachers connected to the common goals of educating our students and, also, inspiring them.

Education is more than lessons, homework, and tests. Education is the transforming process of individuals realizing their unique abilities. And this process starts with a spark of inspiration, and, sometimes, that spark can actually happen in a school auditorium during staff development.

## Maximizing Potential

Karen Stewart ♦ Sampson Elementary School

Grade 3 ♦ Math and Science

*...any road to reaching one's maximum potential must be built on a bedrock of respect for the individual, a commitment to excellence, and a rejection of mediocrity.*

—Buck Rogers

This quote expresses how my classroom runs. Respect in a classroom is the key. I must respect my students, and they, in turn, must respect me and each other. When there is mutual respect, relationships develop, and we understand each other.

I like to visit with my students about what is happening in their lives. I enjoy

complimenting them about things they do well. I continually reinforce that we all have strengths and weakness; things we are good at and things that we need to work on.

A commitment to excellence is very important to me. I work with my students so that they can improve and become successful. School is not easy for some children, but they can learn. It takes extra effort to help them, but it is worth it. They are so proud when they finally understand.

A rejection of mediocrity is also important in a classroom. For many students, putting forth only enough effort to get by has become a habit. They rush through their work or do a sloppy job, just to get it done. I set

high expectations and expect my students to rise to the occasion. I help them with this task, but, ultimately, it is up to them.

I enjoy my students and take pleasure in sharing with them. I feel blessed to teach.

## **We Are a Family**

**Lisa Watson ♦ Bleyl Middle School  
Grades 7-8 ♦ Math ♦ Department Chair**

This year my eighth-grade math class has only 10 students—all are considered at-risk, and most have never passed math or TAKS. Despite our different personalities, we have become a family. Perhaps this situation has occurred because I have encouraged them to teach me about themselves as I teach math to them.

I have learned about aspects of teenage life, such as hairstyles, clothes, rap music (more than I really want to know), and what it is like to live in their world. In the process, I have come to truly understand and love each of them. This approach has generated a greater response from them than I ever could have imagined. Now, more than half are passing tests, and all exhibit a newfound confidence in themselves.

Success has changed their outlook on school and on life as well. My students believe in a future that includes going to high school and being successful. They also know that not only will I not let them accept failure, but also that I will consider their failure to be my failure as well. If a test is failed, it is *our* failure, and we must work that much harder. When one of them passed a test for the first time, I sought him out at football practice. When I told him his grade, the look on his face was priceless.

I really love my new family. They know it, and they love me as well. Usually, I look forward to summer, but this year a part of me will be sorry to see it come.

## **I Wonder**

**Tresa Weisz ♦ Willbern Elementary School  
Grade 5 ♦ Special Education Co-teach ♦ Core Academic Subjects ♦  
Dyslexia Specialist**

It was my second year of teaching, and I was drawn to a particular eighth grader whom I will call John. John was stubborn, and on the outside he had a tough shell. He was determined that he had no need to be in a resource class. His father was a minister, so I expected better behavior and academic work than

what I was getting. There were times when I could be silly and crazy, qualities which prompted an honest laugh from him. I just knew there was more to him than he was giving.

One day, as was typical, he had not done his homework. I explained to him that he had so much potential to do

something with himself. He looked at me as if I were speaking a foreign language. I just *knew* I had to make a difference, and it was now or never. I took him to the phone to call his father so he could explain why he did not have his homework...again. It hurt to see his tears, but the confession was for his own good.

The year went on, and John ended up in DMC for a day here or a day there. On one occasion, he earned a three-day placement. I went to check on him and to ask what he had done. I expressed my disappointment and told him life is all about choices. He replied, "You really do believe in me, don't you?" Indeed, I did believe in him, and I often wonder about him.

## Acceptance

**Alane Williams ♦ Yeager Elementary School  
Kindergarten-Grade 5 ♦ Physical Education**

I can still hear the snickers in the girls' high school locker room. We had just finished volleyball practice, and, as we dressed for class, my teammate asked everyone, "What do you want to be after you graduate?" I was the first one to respond, "I want to be a physical education teacher."

After the giggles ceased, the other girls offered different, more glamorous answers like cruise director, runway model, stewardess.... I did go on to graduate from Texas A&M with a teaching degree, but I specialized in reading, not physical education. After fumbling around on my career path for years, I finally arrived right where I always wanted to be—in the gym, teaching physical education.

The atmosphere of the Yeager gym is one of acceptance. No matter who you are, where you come from, what

labels you carry, you are accepted onto our gym's "level playing field." We play competitive games, practice good sportsmanship, and celebrate differences.

A highlight of my current teaching year occurred when one of our special education students, whom I'll call "Rodney," took his turn in the day's game. He came in last place, but you wouldn't know it by the giant grin on his face. As he rounded the corner carrying the ball, the entire class (about 60 students!) cheered him on, chanting, "Rod-ney! Rod-ney! Rod-ney!"

School is more than books, tests, and homework; it's also about building character and modeling acceptance of others. With a feeling of acceptance, any child can be successful fulfilling his or her dreams and ambitions.

## To Create

**Sheila Wratchford ♦ Wilson Elementary School  
Grade 1 ♦ Reading and Language Arts**

Growing up, I always wanted to be an artist—to create. Very few people knew my true fear of reading. In elementary school I became shy, withdrew from others, and lacked self-confidence. I was scared to death of trying to read “tricky words.” I would have never guessed that I would become a reading teacher.

Many of my students enter my classroom saying, “I can’t read.” My heart breaks. I say, “Hey, you have come to the right place—I teach kids to love reading.”

All students need someone to believe in them, to build on their strengths, and to encourage risk taking—especially in reading. In a supportive learning environment, students are active learners, and they thrive.

Now, I love to read, learn, and try new things in my classroom in order to create an environment that inspires, motivates, and challenges. Our “Classroom Promise” states that we will listen to others, take turns, and help each other learn. We are authors who celebrate each others’ writing. We sing, share poetry, and investigate our world through reading non-fiction. We have a “bag of reading tricks” filled with reading strategies that empower us to overcome those “tricky words.”

Every day, I do create a safe place for my kids at Wilson to become fluent, confident readers and writers. I am part of that community of learners, and I have become an artist who creates an environment where every child succeeds.

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## Positive Role Model

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*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.*

### **Those Who Can—Teach** Cathy Briggs ♦ Cook Middle School Grade 8 ♦ Math ♦ Algebra I

When I headed off to college at the age of 17, I did not know what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. It had to be something that would truly make a difference and that would have a lasting impact on people's lives. Whoever uttered, "Those who can, do; those who can't, teach," has never had the challenge and privilege of standing in front of a class of children, teaching character and curriculum.

I feel that it is my responsibility to model the "Portrait" skills that we expect of our graduates. Our students are perceptive. You cannot stand in front of them and tell them how important it is to be on time, be responsible, be fair, and be a person of your word, unless they *know* that you possess those characteristics yourself.

They should see their teachers demonstrate these qualities each and

every day. Our students watch us to see how we react to situations: Will we see the humor in it? Will we handle it with poise and tact? Will each student be treated fairly and respectfully? They really can see what is in our hearts.

I love my job; I cannot see myself doing anything else. I get up every morning and look forward to delivering content with humor while demonstrating real-life applications. It is imperative that I establish an environment where students feel safe, respected, and cared for, and where they know that every day I have something important to teach them.

I push my kids to do their absolute best on a daily basis, and anything short of that is just not acceptable. No other job has more of an influence on children's lives than teaching; I am honored to be part of this profession.

### **A Shot Heard around the World** Margie Comstock ♦ Jersey Village High School Grades 9-12 ♦ Journalism ♦ Desktop Publishing ♦ Sponsor for Yearbook and Newspaper

From halfway across the globe in Myanmar, an image of a man lying in the street with a soldier holding a rifle

pointed at his chest flashed on my screen. That image dominated front pages across the world last September,

and it belonged to a photographer who was in my journalism program at Jersey Village. Now working for Reuters, he is an international news photographer based out of Bangkok.

He captured those images in two seconds, and those two-second images changed international policy. He possesses a passion that drives great journalists to get the great story at any cost, even personal safety. He has photographed conflicts around the world including Iraq, Afghanistan, East Timor, and now Myanmar.

He has a passion to show the world images that will tell stories that need to be told over and over. He has a passion to break the silence of some of the most secret places in the world with photographs that demand attention.

He shared his experience with me about getting the Myanmar photos. They caused me to breathe deeply as this event was not the first time he put his life on the line to get *the* photo. At one point in Afghanistan, he had six Taliban soldiers pointing their weapons at him. Yet he lived and returned with stories and photos to share with the world.

He emailed me to say I made a difference in his life. Now he is making a difference in the world; and I thank him for that.

*Added note: He received notification in early April that this image earned him the 2008 Pulitzer Prize in Breaking News Photography.*

## **The Numbers and Mrs. Rosen**

**Kirk Eaton ♦ Cypress Falls High School**

**Government ♦ Economics ♦ Athletic Coach for Football and Baseball**

One of my first memories of school is of a first-grade test day. I remember taking a math test and feeling helpless. Nothing made sense. It was like trains were going through my head. I approached my teacher's desk, and I described the problem. Her response? She told me to quit making excuses.

I remember feeling ashamed and believing that something was wrong with me. The problem got worse because I started to feel the same way when reading. School was not a place I enjoyed until I met Mrs. Rosen.

After second grade, I moved to a new school. My mother promised a new start. I did not share her high hopes. I knew I would be in the lowest reading

and math groups. My parents knew I was struggling, and they got me a tutor. Great—what every boy wants for summer vacation, a math tutor. It was now official: I was dumb.

I remember fighting with my parents about going. All I know is that Mrs. Rosen changed everything. She made me forget that numbers scared me. I can't remember exactly what we worked on, but she wanted me to slow down and put my fingers on the numbers. Her strategy worked, and I beat every student in my class in a flashcard race. I later found out that I have dyslexia. God bless Mrs. Rosen, wherever she is, for she and I conquered more than numbers that day.

## **Live with Integrity**

**Cathryn Fellenz ♦ Truitt Middle School**  
**Grades 7-8 ♦ Spanish I, II**

On the first day of school, the motto “Live with Integrity” is boldly printed on my blackboard. After establishing class expectations, we discuss why living with integrity applies to everything in life, including school.

We discuss several examples of making the best choices: For example, we are in the grocery store, and we select a bag of chips. But after moving down to the far end of the aisle, we see the same kind of chips in a larger bag, for a better price. Do we return the original bag to its proper spot, or do we just leave it with the other bags?

After many examples, we discuss how we apply this approach at school. Might we help a student in the hallway who has dropped his belongings? Or do

we step on their papers, scattering them more? Do we study for our classes as each teacher suggests? Or do we attempt to cram it all in the night prior to the test?

In my classes, students have the opportunity to redo any daily grade assignment on which they score below an 80. I now have students who will redo a paper as many as four times in order to get the perfect score.

Last year at midterm, a very challenging student (in my class for the second year) told me that he had reconfigured his “My Space” page over the holiday. Right above his name, it now said, “Live with Integrity.” I beamed with that small victory.

## **Destined to Teach**

**Susan Fennis ♦ Millsap Elementary School**  
**Grades 4-5 ♦ Structured English Immersion ♦**  
**Language Arts and Social Studies ♦ *READ 180***

My life was influenced by a family background of teachers. Both of my parents, my grandmother, and my great-grandmother were teachers before me. I remember hearing stories about my great-grandmother teaching in a one-room schoolhouse and my mother sharing her experiences about her first-grade students. I always looked up to my mother because she was creative and had incredible patience. I knew that I wanted to be just like her someday.

My life and learning experiences included discipline, organization, scheduling, consistency, and a diversity of activities. I felt that I could share my values and learning from my childhood by becoming a teacher. I have taught at-risk and bilingual students for 16 years now. It has been by far the most challenging yet rewarding job that I have ever had.

I never realized what a joy it would be to help students increase their confidence, success, and enthusiasm for learning. My students’ eagerness to

learn, positive attitude, and desire to improve keeps me going every day.

I feel very fortunate that I can share with my students the gift that has been given to me. My family before me provided the foundation and structure for me to become a teacher. My

experience through life gave me the desire to pass on what I have learned. My faith in my students and their trust in me allow them to succeed. Only by working together can they learn what I have been allowed to pass on to them through my teachings.

## **Inspired to Change**

**Nydia Agüero García ♦ Alternative Learning Center  
Grades 7-12 ♦ Spanish 1a, 1b, I, II ♦ Spanish for Native Speakers I, II ♦  
Advanced Academic Strategies**

I inspire students by making a difference in their lives after they have made poor choices that could hinder their education and future. At the Alternative Learning Center, we work with students from the whole district. We teach them the importance of a good education, and we provide a safe environment. After my own experience of coming to the U.S. from Nicaragua at age 10, unable to speak English, I appreciate the value of education and a safe environment.

My favorite part of the week comes when we get new students in a class. When one typical student came into my room, he was very angry. He refused to do any work, and he completely shut down. When students first walk into my classroom, I let them know boundaries, rules, and expectations. He said he did

not like school or teachers, did not know any Spanish, and was not going to do anything.

Little by little, however, he began to do his work in class. He started to pass his tests, develop new confidence, and help new students in the class. For the first time, he realized that he could actually learn Spanish and that it was not as impossible as he had thought it would be.

He became one of the leaders in the class. He was learning that he could find positive applications for his gang leadership skills. When he returned back to his home campus, he had an A in Spanish and was able to remain successful at his school. As my students change, they inspire me as well.

## **You Have *How Many* Children?**

**Amanda Garrett ♦ Campbell Middle School  
Grade 7 ♦ Language Arts ♦ Team Leader**

I was once asked by a colleague, "How many children do you have?" I quickly responded, "Oh, 151...but 152 if you count my husband." My colleague

looked at me with a puzzled expression, and I realized then that I had some explaining to do.

As a teacher, I wear many shoes. Shoes that tell stories, mend bumps and bruises, dance around, sing, nurture, and care. When I walk into my classroom every day, I make it my goal to treat every student as I would treat my very own child. The children in my classroom will tell you that I am not all fun and games, but they respect me and I respect them.

Last year, I had two students I especially took under my wing. Now that they are in eighth grade, they still come see me every day to share stories of their day, seek advice, or just sit in

the class that they call “home base.” That is the connection I strive for; the lifelong connection between student and teacher.

I am honored to have that connection. I am honored to have 151 children, and—although they may not agree with me 100 percent of the time—we laugh together, become frustrated together, make mistakes together, face consequences together, share joys together, and, most importantly, learn together. They are always on my mind, and I take responsibility for each and every one of them.

## **Patience + Compassion = Lasting Impact**

**Johnnetta (Pat) Huff ♦ Hamilton Middle School**

**Grades 6-8 ♦ Special Education Co-teach ♦ Dyslexia Specialist**

Of the many educators who have inspired me, the two most influential are my mom, an elementary supervisor, and my dad, a high school vocational education teacher.

My mom taught at a time when teachers could make home visits. When a student was not progressing, she would go to the student’s home. Unlike most of the teachers, she looked forward to the visits because she gained valuable insight about the student’s circumstances. This insight allowed her to adjust her approach, gain a renewed level of parental support, meet the student’s needs, and improve his or her performance.

I remember the hours that my mom would spend, patiently helping teachers with challenges they were facing. I would hear her make comments like,

“Keep in mind that every child is different, but all can learn.”

As for my dad, I can also recall the countless hours that students would stay after school to work with him. They developed great relationships, and he became a positive role model. Today, my dad is 93 years old, and I am amazed by the phone calls, gifts, and visits that he still receives from his former students as they express their appreciation for his efforts in helping them become successful, productive adults.

From my parents, I have learned that patience and compassion demonstrated in the school setting can have a lasting impact. I am blessed to have acquired these characteristics and will continue to use them to help ensure that each student I teach will learn.

## Center Stage

Stephanie Lyle ♦ Cypress Ridge High School

Dance I-IV ♦ Dazzlers Dance Team Director ♦ Fine Arts Department Chair

"5-6-7-8... Do it again, girls!" These phrases are uttered over and over again throughout the day in the life of a dance educator. I have had the privilege of establishing and developing, for the past six years, the Cypress Ridge Dance Department (including the Dazzlers Dance Team), and teaching dance here has been an honor.

To say that being a positive role model to over 200 young women in a given year is important would be an understatement. I prepare to take center stage each day to lead these dancers. The most rewarding part of being their fearless leader is seeing my dancers complete their journey here at Cypress Ridge and begin making plans for being role models and leaders beyond high school.

My fondest memory of a time of success would be during the annual

Dazzler Senior Circle. The 20 or so seniors each year gather in the dance room for their last chance to bid farewell to the memories, friendships, tears, and sweat they have endured for the last few years. It is there that the girls realize their chapter in high school dance team has come to an end. As seniors recall the five *D*'s of Dazzler success—desire, discipline, dedication, determination, and destination—they realize how valuable these tools will be on the path toward higher education.

The Dazzlers Dance Team—and all my dance students—show me every day that life will give you many lemons, so you must learn how to make lemonade. My center-stage experience has been so rewarding, and this job is such a blessing.

## These Many Years...

Mary Marsh ♦ Francone Elementary School

Grade 3 ♦ Math and Science

After working at Francone for 27 years, I have trouble focusing on only one student or teacher who has been an inspiration to me. There have been students who struggled, yet they are very successful now. There have been students so diligent that they wanted extra papers and supplies to play school at home (one even got an overhead projector from Santa one year). Some have gone on to become dedicated educators in Cy-Fair. Still other

students are the ones I knew, after just the first week in my class, would be successful in anything they did.

The administration and staff have always been an encouragement to me. I am fortunate to have worked for two of the best principals ever—Arlene Robison and Sue Romanowsky. I thank them for my growth as an educator. I have Becky Rhodes to thank for showing me compassion and motivating me to remember that every child

counts. The staff has always been supportive of me, from the support staff to the assistant principals.

But the ones I could not have done this job without are the teachers and other teammates I have had the privilege to work alongside. They

were—and still are—my inspiration, day-in and day-out.

I guess that you could say that teaching generations and working with the best colleagues have been my inspiration in all my years at Francone.

## **The Kind of Teacher I Want to Be**

**Pam Michaelis ♦ Keith Elementary School**

**Grade 1 ♦ English as a Second Language ♦ Reading and Language Arts**

I taught for five years in West Texas, where our youngest daughter began kindergarten in the room right next door to my first-grade classroom. Sometimes, if my room was quiet, I could hear Kristen laughing in her classroom. Sometimes I heard Kristen and her teacher talking or reading together. I am so thankful for those moments. I knew that she had a teacher who loved her and made her day the best it could be.

Each year, as I begin with a new group of students, there's something that I always remember. Every child that enters my classroom is somebody's most special little someone in the world, just as my own child is to me.

For each student, I want to be the kind of teacher that I would want my own child to have—meaning that I want to demonstrate fairness and kindness, have high expectations for my students, and, most of all, see the value and potential in all the children as I encourage them to achieve their goals.

It's not always easy. When children struggle at school, it's easy to look at what is going wrong. But my hope and prayer is that I will always focus on the good in each child, that special little someone that a parent has entrusted to me. I will try my best to live up to parents' wishes, just as I want Kristen's teachers to do for me.

## **Our Greatest Contribution**

**Thao Tran Nguyen ♦ Post Elementary School**

**Kindergarten ♦ English as a Second Language ♦ Core Academic Subjects**

*Our greatest contribution is to be sure there is a teacher in every classroom who cares that every student, every day, learns and grows and feels like a real human being.*  
—Don Clifton

This quote explains simply what I strive to accomplish every day in my classroom. I was a lost child when I first came to America 28 years ago from Viet Nam, and I can still remember clearly how I was so scared, confused, and frustrated while learning the new language and culture. I owe my

success to my parents, teachers, friends, and family who have helped me along the way. They were always around to ensure that I was able to overcome any difficulties I encountered.

Now that I am a kindergarten teacher, I can sympathize with each student who enters my classroom. They, too, are all scared, confused, and frustrated with all the challenges and obstacles that they have to face. Some will cry, some will sit quietly, and some

will act out, in hope of gaining my attention.

Just as others helped me, I am there to help ease the anxiety my students feel. I embrace all children and welcome their differences. Despite the diversity in my classroom, I want each child who enters to achieve his or her highest academic ability. Students need to realize that if they have the courage and determination, they, too, can overcome anything and everything, just as I did.

## **A Coach Is Born**

**Frank (Coach) Patterson ♦ Adaptive Behavior Center  
Grades 6-12 ♦ Physical Education ♦ Social Studies ♦ Health**

It would be difficult and unfair to give credit to just one teacher for my success as a student and an educator. You have heard that “it takes a village to raise a child.” Well, I was that child, and Moultrie, Georgia, was that village.

Growing up without a father for most of my life, I relied on my coaches to be my fathers. It seems I was the forerunner for Special Education—all the teachers gave me preferential seating (placing my desk always by theirs), and I was given extra time to do my assignments (continuing to work into lunch and recess).

My first coach was Floyd Fason. He taught me basketball and football, but, more than that, he laid the foundation for the education that I would obtain over the course of my life. Not only did

he teach me how to compete in athletics, but he also set the standard for me to compete in life. He was an excellent model for showing me what a real teacher should be (serious, funny, trustworthy, likable, and motivational). Coach always wanted me to do the right thing. I never wanted to disappoint him because he had high expectations for me.

Today when I teach and coach, I use a lot of what Coach used with me, such things as trust, humor, seriousness, high expectations, and motivating my students to do their best.

As I receive this honor, I’d like to extend a special thanks to Mrs. Webb, Coach Taylor, Coach Jenkins, Coach Willet, Coach Saturday, and Coach Godwin.

## Oh...You Have *Him* in Your Class!

Connie Roberson ♦ Lamkin Elementary School

Grade 5 ♦ Language Arts and Social Studies

I began my teaching career in Dallas at a private school for students with learning differences. The school was very small, and I was the first new teacher they'd hired in more than five years. Once homerooms were assigned, I began to notice others looking at me, patting me on the back, and making abundant comments like, "Oh...you have *him* in your class. Good luck!" As a first-year teacher, I was beginning to question my career choice.

Well, school began, and I did have quite a few "Oh, *hims*" in my class! Luckily, I also met the person who would become my professional mentor and role model, Jim Toner. A retired principal, Jim had returned to the

classroom for just the kind of students I'd been warned about. Jim taught me to see, love, reach, and teach each student—not for who they were, but for who they could become.

Since that first year of teaching, I've asked for—and enjoyed—those students that others have given up on. I've also had the pleasure of attending high school and college graduation ceremonies for students whom others had considered the most lost of causes.

This year, I've had the honor of mentoring two first-year teachers. What a pleasure it has been to serve as their role model, honoring my friend Jim in doing so.

## It's All about Relationships

Sandra Silvey ♦ Arnold Middle School

Grade 8 ♦ Math

My first year in education, I was not only a new teacher, but I also had my daughter in my class. I always said that I would not treat her differently than I would treat other students. I soon learned I had that wrong. Instead, I learned how to treat my students the same way I wanted my daughter to be treated, with respect and dignity.

I strive to let my students know that I am not just their math teacher—I am a person who cares about them. I make an effort to conduct myself in a respectful way, and I expect my students to do the same. Setting high standards and having high expectations

with the knowledge that I care about their well-being, my students feel free to take the risks needed to reach their potential.

Along with my daughter's role in my teaching philosophy, I would like to acknowledge another positive role model, my mom. Over the years, she taught me how to tie my shoes, ride a bike, drive a car, and be a patient person. She taught me these skills by setting high standards, having high expectations and treating me with respect and dignity.

As I start every day, I think about my mother and my daughter and the

ways they became role models for me in life and in education. I strive to remind myself that being a good teacher requires more than knowing how to

teach. It takes building relationships with my students and letting them know that I care.

## Home Away from Home

Christina Stout ♦ Emmott Elementary School  
Grade 5 ♦ Math and Science

*There are many things that will catch my eye, but there are only a few that catch my heart.*

—Tim Redmond

I love what I do and feel blessed that I have the opportunity each day in my classroom to make a difference. As many people have influenced me and made an impact on my life, I hope to be that same beacon of light for my students.

My inspiration for teaching is a culmination of my own lifelong experiences, both personal and professional. I learned from

- ♦ my parents—never to give up on anyone;
- ♦ my fifth grade reading teacher—fairness and understanding;
- ♦ my high school drill team instructor—the need for discipline and structure; and

- ♦ my tenth-grade math teacher—failure is not an ending, but a place from which to grow.

All of these lessons have had a positive impact on me.

Each day in my classroom, I try to put myself in my students' shoes, striving to make personal connections and create ways to capture their excitement of learning and discovery. I know I cannot afford to lose the interest or attention of even one student because that one loss may ripple for years in the student's learning process.

I believe my classroom environment is a place that allows students the ability to ask questions and explore their own learning needs without fear of failure. My ultimate goal each day is to create a safe and trusting place for my students to learn and grow. I want to make all students feel as though they are truly at home in my classroom.

## Truly Special Stars

Kelly Strauss ♦ Sheridan Elementary School  
LIFE Skills

It is my ongoing mission not only to educate the students in my classroom about the world around them, but also to educate the world around us about

children with disabilities. In an effort to continue my mission, I created a "Special Stars" program to bring general education students into the LIFE Skills

room. The program was designed to teach leadership and responsibility to the Special Stars (the visiting general ed. students) while the students in LIFE Skills would spend time with positive role models. However, as I created the program, I was unaware of how much I would learn and gain from it as well.

Acceptance is one thing that the Special Stars have taught me. They are able to look beyond the disability of each child and simply see him or her as a peer. Hearing aids and speech impairments are of no concern to them. Their response has reminded me that sometimes I need to let my students be

just children, rather than children with disabilities.

Patience is another virtue that I have learned from watching the Special Stars. No matter how simple the task, they work slowly and deliberately to ensure that they are teaching my students every step of the way. They have taught me to be patient and to recognize that sometimes the process is more important than the outcome.

My hope is that both the Special Stars and my students are learning all that they can from this experience, but I know that I have truly been the one to learn the most.

## What I've Learned

Anton Truong ♦ Cypress Woods High School  
Chemistry I ♦ Physics I ♦ Chemistry AP

Many people have served as role models for my career as a teacher; some are even CFISD educators who had the task of educating me. I want to acknowledge their contributions to my teaching philosophy by paraphrasing what I've learned from them.

- ♦ No one cares how much you know, until they know how much you care. (Ms. Reed, my Latin teacher)
- ♦ You learn by understanding, not by memorizing. (Dr. Allen, my Precalculus teacher)
- ♦ If you make students laugh, they are more likely to listen to everything else. (Mr. Hallmark, my Calculus teacher)
- ♦ Hard work always triumphs over talent. Even the best work hard to improve themselves. (Mrs. Gilley, my Chemistry AP teacher)

- ♦ Your love for the material shows through in how you teach it. (Mrs. Smartt, my English I teacher)
- ♦ It's not about you. It's about the kids. (Mr. Hecker, former director of instruction at Cypress Woods)
- ♦ Questions? Answers? Silly faces? Ask any question that can get results. (Mrs. Zagrodsky, my fifth-grade teacher)
- ♦ Help the ones you love, and help the ones you hate. Help them all the same. (my mother)
- ♦ Answer questions as if you already know, but teach as if you are learning *with* them. (Dr. Hogg, my advisor at Texas A&M)

They never explicitly taught me these ideals, but I learned them nonetheless. I have not only become a better teacher, but I have become a better person.

## **Relationships, Baby!**

**Dawn Tryon ♦ Adam Elementary School  
Grade 2 ♦ Math and Science**

When you find the right career, it doesn't feel as if you are working! Teaching at Adam Elementary for the past 12 years has been an amazing journey in which I have been blessed to work with a tireless staff, incredible leadership, and wonderful students!

Along the way, I have experienced the changing trends in education that we embrace hoping for success from our students. We have assessed with the TABS, TEAMS, TAAS, and TAKS. Our math department has implemented SQ-RQ-CQ, The Q, windowpanes, and the 4 Square for complex problem solving.

Our reading program has evolved to include phonics, Spalding, whole language, to balanced literacy. In an ever-changing field, the one thing that remains constant is the need to build meaningful relationships with my

colleagues, my students, and the community. Before I can be an advocate for children, for change, and for Cy-Fair, I must build genuine relationships.

I believe teachers must create strong, quality relationships to ensure positive outcomes for kids. By nurturing the children and putting their needs first, I hope to create a solid foundation to build on. Putting relationships first has allowed me to vigorously teach, taking the changes and challenges of education in stride. If I can show my students how to be kind, caring, and accepting of all people, then I have taught!

Balance in life is the key to happiness. Relationships rock—make each one count!

## **The Stolen Chalk**

**Vicky Vest ♦ Dean Middle School  
Grades 6-7 ♦ Language Arts ♦ Department Chair**

"It will never be missed," I thought as I went through the back door, entering the kitchen of my family home. Mother was already back from her day of teaching, and she was waiting anxiously for my arrival.

One glance upon my guilt-ridden face had my mother asking, "What happened?"

I lowered my head in shame, and I proceeded to tell her of my dilemma. "I was out of chalk, Mom, and I only took two little pieces."

She sat down with me at the table, and we talked for a while about knowing right from wrong and about respecting other people's property. Then we covered options on how to fix my problem.

Before I knew it, I was walking down the path, back to my elementary school. As I entered the quiet, deserted classroom—heart pounding, hands shaking—I gingerly laid down the now crumbled, sweaty pieces of stolen chalk onto the chalk tray.

There. It was done.

I stood in that classroom of my third-grade year, and a certain revelation came to me. It was as if time stood still. At that moment, I knew that I was to become a teacher.

My mother's gentleness, love, and respect for others guide me in my

classroom each day. She taught me what was important in life. Now, every new school year, I purchase a special box of chalk that serves as a reminder of how fragile and beautiful life can be. I feel truly blessed.

Thank you, Mom.

## **Keeping It in the Family**

**Lisa White ♦ Walker Elementary School  
Reading Enrichment**

It is an honor to receive this award and represent Walker Elementary. There are many teachers in my family, aunts and cousins who inspired me to become a teacher—even an aunt who was my second-grade teacher.

My Great-Aunt Mae, however, stands out in my mind. If it weren't for her, I may not have finished college. My college education may not have been possible without the desire my parents had for me to go to college and the willingness and generosity of my great-aunt to see that desire fulfilled. When I was going to stop after two years of college, it was she who talked to me about the importance of a good education.

Aunt Mae was an algebra teacher. She sometimes tutored students in her home. I saw how she really wanted her

students to understand what she was teaching. She was very sincere in helping her students. I have always enjoyed working with children—from babysitting to Bible school to the classroom. It seemed natural that I would choose a career in teaching.

I hope that I have become a role model for my students, not only with regard to learning, but in all aspects of their lives. I try to make my students realize that if they do the very best job they can, then they have reached success.

After 29 years of teaching, I am delighted to know that not only have I tried to be a role model for my students, but also for my daughter, inspiring her to become a teacher as well.

## **It Takes a Village**

**Donna Woods ♦ Hancock Elementary School  
Kindergarten ♦ English as a Second Language ♦ Core Academic Subjects**

The roots of self-esteem develop early in life and are not necessarily related to specific accomplishments. No matter how often I analyze the

respective roles of the family, school, or community, one proverb remains an affirmation for me: "It takes a village to raise a child."

Undeniably, my passion is for the teaching profession; I believe that passion extends beyond the subject matter. I welcome the opportunity to work with academically and culturally diverse children.

Norma Ault and Elizabeth Wigger, among others, are the greatest professional inspirations in my career. They inspired me by their leadership and their convictions for education. What I learned from these great educators at the beginning of my teaching career has remained true for over 30 years.

Each year I receive visits, cards, and letters from former students. The first question is always, "Do you remember me?" They express love and gratitude for my being a positive influence in their lives. It is humbling to know that I have touched so many lives and people.

Even through all the years of teaching, our "village" remains the same. I strive to have a positive, respectful, and culturally-diverse atmosphere. I am proud to have the honor of representing Hancock Elementary as its "Spotlight Teacher," and I share this recognition with everyone in my village.

## **Big Shoes to Fill**

**Laurie Worchesik ♦ Fiest Elementary School  
Kindergarten ♦ Core Academic Subjects**

I am forever grateful to my parents for being the most extraordinary role models. My parents have instilled high morals and values in me, my brothers, and my sister, and I feel truly blessed to have been exposed to so many positive experiences throughout my life because of them. They taught me how to be responsible, how to respect myself and others, how to love, how to care, and so much more. What a profound obligation!

Now I have stepped into those big shoes as an educator! It is my role and responsibility to provide my students with many of the same values my parents instilled in me. It is an awesome feeling knowing that I could

be that "one person" to influence students in a positive way.

Every morning, I greet my students with a smile, and I make sure they know I am happy they came to school. I enjoy celebrating their successes, no matter the intensity of the task. I encourage them to challenge themselves as learners as well as individuals. I truly believe that every child can succeed, if given the opportunity!

With that said, it is my honor to have the chance to make sure each student who walks into my classroom will experience a positive environment and will be commended for his or her successes.

## Vision

Yanine Zambrano ♦ Kirk Elementary School  
Grade 1 ♦ Bilingual ♦ Core Academic Subjects

*A rock pile ceases to be a rock pile  
the moment a single man  
contemplates it, bearing within him  
the image of a cathedral.*

—Antoine de Saint-Exupéry  
author, *The Little Prince*

As a teacher, I see not only the “cathedral” mentioned in this quote, but also a whole world of possibilities in each student who sits before me.

My students depend on me to guide them along the learning experience and to encourage them in their pursuit of their own dreams with my instruction and guidance. I adjust my teaching style to my students’ learning

preferences to unlock their hidden potential. Each day, I make sure to incorporate joy in my lessons so that learning becomes exciting and engaging. It is very important to build an environment where students feel confident and motivated to learn, believing in their capabilities and potential.

My inspiration arrives every morning as I enter the school door and think about how I will approach my students in the same manner that my son’s teachers would approach him—with dignity, respect, and vision. It is truly a privilege to be a part of the foundation that builds great works of art from young minds.

# Lifelong Learner

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*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.*

## A Heart for Children

**Donna Christy ♦ Goodson Middle School  
Grade 6 ♦ Science ♦ Team Leader**

Even though I did my undergraduate work in education, I did not begin my teaching career right out of college. Instead, I broadened my horizons by working in the business world. For 10 years, I sold parts for heavy equipment trucks and cranes. I learned all I could about the equipment and ended up being a formidable salesperson. Although I was good at my job, it just didn't hold my interest; I always felt as if something were missing.

The thing is, I knew that working with children was the vocation that I would truly thrive in; teaching was my heart's work.

I left that job and set my sights on beginning my career in public education. I feel certain that I was offered a position at my very first interview because I spoke from my heart about children and explained how my

enthusiasm and energy would positively affect the lives of my students.

Happily, after 15 years in CFISD as a science teacher, I have experienced many incredible teaching moments, exposed my students to the fascinating world of science, and developed relationships with my students.

Do I feel successful as a teacher? Absolutely! I can't help thinking of one particular child who validated me as a teacher. This young man wanted desperately to make good grades, but he rarely did. One class period when we were preparing for a test, he quietly said to me, "Mrs. Christy, you are more important than the President of the United States because you care about me and teach me."

This child's comment has resonated with me for years. He saw straight into my heart and recognized the very reason I became a teacher.

## A Vision of Learning

**Tayaka Daniels ♦ Horne Elementary School  
Grades 3-5 ♦ At-risk Specialist**

*Where there is no vision, the people perish.*

*—Proverbs 29: 18 (KJV)*

Now in the tenth year of my journey as an educator, I truly understand the sentiment that echoes through this quote. The role of an educator is varied

and multifaceted. Yet, it is highly ineffective without a vision for the students' success.

Growing up in rural North Carolina presented very few paths to success. However, my parents taught me that learning is pivotal. I became a sponge, saturating myself with knowledge. I used what I learned at school to empower my community. My vision is that my students will also become lifelong learners.

Often, children only associate learning with school. It is my job to help them understand that their world provides daily learning opportunities. It is imperative that my students understand that learning neither begins nor ends in their classrooms; instead, it

is a natural and infinite part of their everyday experiences.

My students know that I am “crazy” about learning and that I want them to be crazy about learning as well. I always share discoveries I’ve found in books, periodicals, and trips to the library. My classroom is always abuzz about our deliveries of new books from Scholastic, and I can’t wait to share what I learned during staff development opportunities with my students. I encourage my students to share their learning with their community as they spend time soaking up learning from the world around them. They become my ambassadors as they are empowered to transform their lives through learning.

## Today Is a Great Day to Learn Something New

Krista Dankert ♦ Moore Elementary School

Grade 5 ♦ Math and Science

*You learn something every day if you pay attention.*

—Ray LeBlond

It’s been a great day when you have learned something new! This affirmation was an important lesson I learned in school. I was fortunate to have impassioned teachers who taught engaging lessons and instilled in their students an enthusiasm for learning.

When I began teaching, I set a goal to help all students become lifelong learners. I knew that if I were to impart a love of learning, I must lead by example. When you have this attitude,

I believe that you are open to new ideas and new teaching approaches.

CFISD has given me wonderful professional development opportunities. I was fortunate to be asked to attend Quantum Learning and Capturing Kids’ Hearts. These workshops showed me ways to inspire the love of learning by connecting personally to students, developing a sense of community within the classroom, helping them understand how they learn, and improving learning techniques.

Staff development sessions helped me improve classroom management, build relationships, and integrate technology. I have also learned so much from the varied experiences of other teachers. They are an amazing

resource! These many experiences and trainings have contributed to the range of skills that make it possible to reach all students.

By continuing to grow to meet the needs of students, I am setting the

example of a lifelong learner. We can learn from anyone in life, and some of the most rewarding lessons are the times I have learned from my students.

## **No Excuses!**

**Lisa Fasan ♦ Carlton Pre-vocational Center  
Grades 6-12 ♦ LIFE Skills**

I credit my inspiration as a teacher to my journalism teacher in high school. She showed us the value of being lifelong learners. From day one, she set the expectations high—no excuses, no comparing, do your best! The best part was that she really meant it.

Until that class, I didn't know that school could apply to real life. She intertwined journalism and real life with such great lessons that I still remember them to this day. My favorite is

"Ignorance is not an excuse! If you don't know, find out!" No one was allowed to be helpless or act helpless.

Her admonition has been such a powerful lesson for me, not only personally, but also professionally, in my work with students with disabilities. Helplessness for them may be a challenge, but it can't be an excuse! Everyone has the opportunity to be a lifelong learner.

## **Ah-ha!**

**Shannon Garton ♦ Frazier Elementary School  
Grade 4 ♦ Math and Science**

Have I always wanted to be a teacher? That's the question I inevitably get from my students each year. To be honest, I tell them, a teacher is not what I wanted to be when I grew up.

As a child, I wanted to be a lawyer and argue for a living. Then I got to high school, and my mind changed. I loved science and wanted to be an engineer. A few years later, I got to college, and my mind changed again. I knew I wanted to do something that would always allow me to learn new things and to talk all the time. I wished

I could just take classes and stay in school forever!

Ah-ha! I'll be a teacher! I'll learn new things and then pass that knowledge onto others by talking! And the best part is, I will always be learning!

When I think back on making that decision, I know 100% that it was (and still is) the right one. I absolutely love what I do! I love watching a child finally understand how to solve a problem or have his "ah-ha" moment.

I am constantly learning for my students. I work with our future every

day. It's always changing. No two days are ever the same. I work with amazing people on a daily basis. Now,

all I ever think about is how I will always want to be a teacher.

## What a Wonderful World

Tiffany Holomon ♦ Owens Elementary School  
Grade 1 ♦ Core Academic Subjects

From an early age, I knew that I wanted to be a teacher. I knew that I wanted not only to teach children but also to truly reach them. What I didn't know was that those very children would end up teaching *me* instead.

Life is a journey. My teaching experience has been and continues to be an incredible journey, a journey in which I have learned over a hundred names. All those names have faces. All those names have histories, backgrounds, experiences, dreams, and stories that have changed me forever. All those names have voices that greet

me as if I were a celebrity when, in fact, I'm just a teacher.

Most importantly, all those names belong to children who allowed me not only to be their teacher, but also to be a small part of their lives. Those names are the reason I wake up every morning. Those names give me life and purpose in this world. Those names have helped me grow into the person I am today.

I have the best job in the world because I get to do what I love most! How I long to see those names again in the next 10 or 20 years when "I think to myself...what a wonderful world!"

## The Perpetual Student

Sherry A. Johnson ♦ Holbrook Elementary School  
Grade 2 ♦ Language Arts and Reading

*The illiterate of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.*

—Alvin Toffler

When I became a senior in high school and started pondering my future, I visited several universities. One day, there in the middle of a classroom, was my third-grade teacher! I waved. She beckoned me to stay. While waiting, I

thought about her passion for teaching. I thought about her commitment to return to the role of student. I thought about her hectic schedule, balancing the responsibilities of being a student, a teacher, and a mother of three. Her role as my inspiration was instantly solidified!

As we talked (she remembered my name and where I sat in her class!) she stated, with a smile, that "a true teacher never stops learning." Like my teacher, I hunger for knowledge.

Today, I embrace her passion for teaching and helping individuals realize their potential. I share her belief that each student who walks through my door can learn; consequently, I approach each day with renewed desire to reach and teach my students.

We must strive to grow personally and professionally in order to be proactive teachers. May I be the perpetual student, willing, eager, and motivated to learn. Reflecting on the

challenges we will encounter in meeting the needs of students, I hear the following words echo in my mind.

*The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them.*

—Albert Einstein

## Learning Starts at Home

Kandace Kitchen ♦ Thornton Middle School

Grades 6-7-8 ♦ English as a Second Language ♦ READ 180

My parents were my true inspirations, and their example led to my success in learning. As far back as I can remember, my parents greeted each day by pouring coffee, then poring over the newspaper. This simple act not only encouraged my reading habits, but also heightened my awareness of current events—and often supplied me with the joke *du jour*.

My dad's love of reading and knowledge did not stop with the newspaper but expanded to historical fiction, autobiographies, and even an occasional perusal of the encyclopedia. My parents' vast knowledge led to many great conversations, which I came to appreciate more and more.

The domino effect proved positive in my family as both my mother and grandmother became educators, as did two of my sisters. Learning, reading, and developing the skills necessary to be a successful adult have always been, and will always be, focal points in my life.

This desire for learning and for guiding others in the process drives me each day. Each year presents new and exciting challenges. Each year provides extraordinary experiences and unique relationships with students. Having the opportunity to watch them explore the dynamic world of reading has been a highlight in my educational career.

## Unexpected Inspirations

Kristie Lambert ♦ Postma Elementary School

Grade 3 ♦ Math and Science

As we all do when we decide to become teachers, I thought about how I would inspire my students to be their

best. But I never expected how much the students would inspire *me* to be my best. I learned very quickly that they

had just as many lessons to teach me as I had to teach them.

In my first year of teaching, I had the great privilege of being inspired by a little boy who came to school every day with a bright smile and an eager attitude. Imagine my surprise when I learned that this amazing child went to work every night with his mother and cleaned office buildings until the early hours of the morning.

He had to accompany his mother because his father had abandoned the family and returned to Mexico. He could have chosen to let his situation cloud his desire to learn, but he didn't; instead,

he came to school ready to work every day.

I realized that my challenges paled in comparison to his, and his positive attitude inspired me to work even harder for my students. What a valuable lesson he taught me!

This example is just one unexpected inspiration of dozens that I have experienced as a teacher, and such occasions continually motivate me to seek new skills and strategies to be the best teacher I can be.

I pray every day that I am inspiring my students. More importantly, I am thankful every day for the unexpected inspirations my students provide for me.

## **Art from the Heart**

**Vickey Morgan ♦ Matzke Elementary School  
Kindergarten-Grade 5 ♦ Art**

My students have always inspired me to be a lifelong learner. I started my career teaching special education. Due to the diverse learning styles of my students, I was constantly trying new approaches to ensure their success and to build their confidence.

As an art teacher, I am inspired by my students' love of art. I believe all children are artists.

I teach my students to be creative problem solvers while I teach the elements and principles of art. I research information about artists to share with my students. I try to build their self-confidence as artists while teaching them to accept nothing but their very best.

I am always amazed at the artwork my students produce. I believe art comes from the heart. After I teach the techniques and processes necessary to complete a project, I am rewarded by artwork unique to each student.

I try to instill in my students the excitement that I feel about art so they will be lifelong learners as I am. I know I have reached my goal when I meet a child in the hall and that child tells me he can't wait to come to art class or when a child brings a picture from home, drawn especially for me. With a beaming smile, he hands me the gift of art.

## Lifelong Readers

Melissa Morrow ♦ Ault Elementary School  
Grade 5 ♦ Language Arts and Social Studies

I feel that being a great reader is the key to success! Reading is a lifelong skill that I set as a priority from the first day of school. At the beginning of each year, I tell my students that, even if they may not like to read now, by the end of the year they will *love* to read.

I spend a great deal of time planning which novels to share. It is very important to me to cover as many genres as possible so that every student has a chance to become connected with books. I take time to share my passion for books by beginning each day reading aloud to my classes.

Every six weeks my students set reading goals, which I expect them to achieve. They know how important reading is to me, and I am amazed at how they rarely let me down. They know I truly care for them, which I show by making them accountable for their actions. It is great to see the pride they feel in their successes.

I want my students to leave my classroom prepared for sixth grade—with a love of reading and with the knowledge that they can accomplish their goals.

## The Gift of Learning

Dana Palmer ♦ Hopper Middle School  
Grade 8 ♦ Science

*Teaching should be such that what is offered is perceived as a valuable gift and not as a hard duty.*

—Albert Einstein

After all, what could be more important than motivating children to value their education intrinsically so that their goals and dreams might one day be reached?

I was blessed to spend four years of my college career under the expert guidance of a professor who, like Einstein, believed that education is a gift to be embraced. Dr. Walter Lewke's education classes consisted of lively discussions, full of debate and humor. He put forth a tremendous effort to

make me feel comfortable so that I could express my point of view without fear of judgment or retribution. The comments he made on my papers and the advice he rendered during my student teaching semester were always stated positively, and they were things he modeled as a teacher. Above all, Dr. Lewke's love of teaching made his classes both entertaining and captivating.

Using this model, I strive to inspire students to view their education as a precious gift that may lead them to achieving their goals. I go to school each day excited to teach, and I work hard to prepare stimulating, quality lessons that will reach kids on a personal level. I want my students to

enter my science class with the enthusiasm to learn something new—not because they will be tested on it,

but because it may lead them toward a dream they have not yet realized.

## **Thank You, Donny!**

**Kathy Pena ♦ A. Robison Elementary School  
Grades 1-5 ♦ Reading Enrichment**

To Robert Fulghum's book *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, I would add that much of what I have learned about teaching I learned while teaching kindergarten. The best lesson came from "Donny," one of my students.

Donny had fair skin, big brown eyes, and dark hair. His father was a single parent. I had seriously questioned Donny's ability as I observed him both struggling to write his name and failing at every attempt to use scissors. One day, his father asked if Donny could have more library privileges, explaining, "Donny loves books."

I made arrangements, and the following day Donny brought back his book and asked for another. I questioned whether someone had read

him the third-grade book. He replied, "I didn't need help. I knew all the words." Skeptical, I asked him to read aloud part of the book. I heard him read with fluency, accuracy, enjoyment and obvious understanding. Amazed, I asked who taught him how to read.

Looking at me as though he was the teacher and I was the student who "just couldn't get it," he patiently explained, "My brain just figured it out." (By the way, that is the best description I have ever found for how a child learns to read.)

In my job as Reading Specialist, I often call on Donny's words of wisdom to approach struggling readers. I use my experience, creativity, and skill to help my students' brains to "just figure it out." Thank you, Donny!

## **My First Real Lesson**

**Heather Wilde ♦ Tipps Elementary School  
Grade 5 ♦ Structured English Immersion ♦ Math and Science**

It was spring and my first semester of being a teacher. I was full of enthusiasm and ideas, and I was going to teach my third graders everything I knew! What I didn't know was that one particular individual would teach me so much more.

I'll call him Tommy. He had fiery red hair—and the personality to match—and he challenged me in everything I

did and said. I went home many nights wondering if the two of us were going to make it until May.

In the weeks that followed, we both learned. He learned to love reading, and I learned to have understanding and patience. I taught him social studies, and he taught me that, for every tough moment, there are two inspiring moments, and for every "I

don't get it" there is an "aha." I learned that each day brought on new mysteries and new discoveries, but, most importantly, I learned that teaching really was about learning.

On the last day of school, Tommy told me "thank you," and I responded in kind. I know he was speaking as an eight-year-old child with as much

sincerity as he could, but my thank you carried so much more. I have had many Tommys since then, and I continue learning from each and every one. But my first Tommy taught me my first real lesson. He taught me what it is to really *feel like* a teacher, not just *be* a teacher.

## **A Serendipitous Journey**

**Debbie Winkelmann ♦ Reed Elementary School  
Dyslexia Specialist ♦ Small Group Reading Instruction**

From the age of six when I lined up my stuffed animals to be my students, I've wanted to be a teacher. Fresh out of college, I landed my dream assignment: teaching geometry and calculus (and learning BASIC programming one day ahead of my students). Shortly after my children were born, I had the chance to teach preschool students. After all, if I could teach calculus, surely I could teach the ABC's and 1 to 10! I developed a new set of skills, but, more importantly, I discovered the excitement of shaping young lives.

Eventually I "graduated" to teaching first-grade math, science, and social studies. When asked to train for Reading Recovery, I embraced a new area of education and loved it! I built on my new reading strategies with my

next challenge: teaching students with dyslexia. With this challenge, I learned about "coding words" and assessment procedures.

My latest quest has been to integrate support staff and intervention programs to aid our struggling readers. Working with our counselor, we implemented a program in which older students (some dyslexic) tutor younger students. This unique opportunity extends my learning to students who "pass it on" to others.

Never in my wildest dreams could I have predicted the fulfillment of helping young children discover the thrill of learning. My family teases me, "What are you going to do next year?" Who knows what great adventure awaits the lifelong learner?

## **It Just Keeps Getting Better**

**Terri Womack ♦ Metcalf Elementary School  
Kindergarten ♦ Core Academic Subjects**

I've been blessed to have taught kindergarten for 15 years, during which time I have witnessed many changes.

Not long after I came to this district, I was part of the transition that expanded the schedule from half-day to full-day,

raising the level of expectations for our “babies.” It would no longer be sufficient for the students to leave kindergarten with a simple knowledge of letters, sounds, and some number concepts.

I dove right into guided reading groups and began teaching the students how to write in daily journals. My math tubs were beginning to take shape as I took the time to develop manipulatives and activities to reinforce skills ranging from sorting and classifying to addition and subtraction.

Classroom management was a skill I refined by teaching Boys Town social skills for success on a daily basis. I was

able to perform these small miracles through the support and professional development offered by Cypress-Fairbanks I.S.D.

As time has passed, the training and support offered by the district have only gotten better. I have learned how to conference with my budding writers, challenge them with higher-level thinking skills during math lessons, and build better relationships through class meetings. I begin each new school year with a level of excitement, knowing that I have the tools at hand to encourage and teach all of my students the skills that they need to build the proper foundation for their lifelong learning.

## **What I Learned to Love**

**Frederick Young, Jr. ♦ Langham Creek High School**

**Grade 9 ♦ Algebra I**

If I had not met and married my wife, Kim, and had the love and support of my parents, I would not be teaching today. I grew up in a very loving and supportive household, but education beyond high school was never an expectation.

I was not very fond of high school, so I actually looked forward to working instead of attending college. Going into the workforce after high school actually benefited me, and I never regret this choice. It reinforced the many lessons my parents had instilled in me about hard work, responsibility, and respect for others.

When my wife and I had been married for five years, we had a wonderful son Frederick, owned our own house, and lived very comfortably in northern Virginia. Although we were

doing well, inside I longed for something else. I hid this feeling from my wife until her company offered her a promotion that would require us to move to Texas. She nearly turned the offer down without mentioning it to me.

Luckily, she did tell me about it, and, to her surprise, I told her we should consider it. My wife had tried for years to convince me to go to college, and we both knew that her new job could make this aspiration come true.

So we did the unthinkable and moved. Five years later, now with another wonderful child, Sydney, I graduated from Texas A&M with cum laude honors. As it turns out, I had discovered something new about myself—I loved to learn.

Now I had to decide what to do with all of this new-found knowledge, and

only one thing came to mind. It was to give others what I had discovered, a love for learning. I'm not sure how many of my students learn to love math, but I am certain that most now have a better appreciation for learning.

My wife teases me often that she had hoped I would become an engineer so she could quit her job; however, she knows, as I know, that I now do something I love. I teach.

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# Team Player

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*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.*

## Gym Rat

**Patti Arechiga ♦ Gleason Elementary School  
Grade 2 ♦ Math and Science**

Growing up as the youngest sister of two older brothers, I spent many hours following them to sporting events. My dad often referred to me as a "Gym Rat." It was inevitable that I would follow in my brothers' footsteps and enjoy participating in athletic events myself.

I participated in team sports as far back as I can remember. It was my passion growing up. I always preferred games that required team cooperation. Knowing that others depended on me to be successful inspired me to work hard and always try my best. My role as an encourager and supporter was developed during these years.

I find myself using these same skills as a teacher today. It is my greatest joy to teach a group of students how to work together and cooperate as a team to solve problems. I know I am successful when I see a group of seven- and eight-year-old students with their heads together, sharing ideas, using encouraging words, and teaching each other through cooperation and teamwork.

I find the same joy observing teachers working together in similar ways. It is an honor to be named Gleason's Spotlight teacher when I am surrounded by so many teachers who shine brightly each and every day.

## Many as One

**Amy Moore ♦ Labay Middle School  
Grades 6-7-8 ♦ Choir**

In August of 1998, Mr. Berry stepped to the podium and said, "Welcome to Cy-Fair ISD, the center of the universe!" We chuckled but wondered what the superintendent's words meant. The answer is clear to me now and brings to mind three words—team, passion, and harmony.

Cy-Fair is not one team but many teams.

- ♦ I am a member of the Labay team, committed to student excellence.
- ♦ I am a member of the secondary music team, recognized as one of the most outstanding in the state.
- ♦ I am a member of the lead mentor team, helping train and mentor teachers new to Cy-Fair.
- ♦ I am a member of the vertical team from elementary to high school,

working together to ensure student success.

- ◆ I am a member of the electives team, providing students an outlet to pursue their dreams.

These teams become Cy-Fair and provide the passion that creates greatness.

My colleagues inspire me with drive and commitment. Only here are teachers afforded these opportunities for inspiration. Only here can one see deep-seated passion for education, not

just in a one-dimensional, subject-centered view but in a holistic plane that bridges buildings, grades, and subjects. In a word: harmony.

Our harmony sets us apart. It inspires me to become a better teacher. It drives me to bring out the best in my students, just as CFISD brings out the best in me.

In my choirs, I strive to instill “team, passion and harmony”—powerful words that strengthen and define all who live by them.

## The Perfect Winning Combination

Julia A. Todd ◆ Duryea Elementary School

Grade 1 ◆ Language Arts

*A successful team beats with one heart.*

—Al McGuire

To be chosen as Duryea’s 2008 Spotlight teacher is an amazing honor. I am both humbled and blessed to be a member of an incredible first-grade team, to whom the Spotlight teacher designation should also be awarded.

My classroom teaching success is a combination of my team’s relationship as teachers, partners, mentors, and—best of all—friends. Our team has the “perfect winning combination”! We spend countless hours planning, problem-solving, and supporting one another to ensure the success of each one of our students.

I am only one of many who deserve this award, and I am a better teacher because of those around me. My team is always ready to lend a helping hand and share their ideas, strategies, and knowledge with one another and with our students. Being a part of such a wonderful team is something very rare and unique.

Because of each teacher on my team, I have been able to shine. This award is truly the reflection of a group of wonderful individuals with whom I work. I proudly share this honor with my first-grade team at Duryea, whose personal strengths, talents, and dedication to our profession will allow us to continue to be a “Spotlight Team”!

## How Can I Help?

Elissa Wells ♦ Kahla Middle School  
Grade 8 ♦ Science

Hearing the question “How can I help?” can completely change a teacher’s life. Whether it comes from a student, a team member, or an administrator, it builds the framework for success. And asking that question is even more powerful.

Last May, when my team received our TAKS scores, we were truly disappointed. Apparently, what we were doing was not working for our students. We took a few weeks to be frustrated and depressed, and we came back to school with the consensus that we must change what we are doing.

It’s a lot of work to completely restructure a course, but it had to be done. We could have tried to do this task alone, but we had the complete

support of other teachers and administrators who would continually ask, “How can I help?” My team worked unbelievably hard, but we never worked alone. The success of this endeavor is felt every day in our classrooms.

Kahla has been built from the ground up, with lots of hard work and great teachers. The true success has been that, no matter how much is going on, there is always someone there who says, “How can I help?”

We work together to solve problems, we plan ahead to avoid future problems, and we do whatever it takes for our students to be successful. It’s a true team effort. It’s a team I am proud to be a part of.

You may view this publication online—along with *Spotlight* editions from some previous years—at [www.cfid.net](http://www.cfid.net) by selecting “Curriculum” within the “Departments” menu.

## Index by Campus

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ABC .....	33	Emmott.....	35	Lowery .....	15
Adam.....	37	Farney.....	10	Matzke .....	46
ALC .....	29	Fiest.....	39	McFee .....	21
André.....	11	Francone.....	31	Metcalf .....	49
Aragon.....	10	Frazier.....	43	Millsap.....	28
Arnold.....	34	Gleason .....	52	Moore.....	42
Ault .....	47	Goodson .....	41	Owens.....	44
Bane.....	14	Hairgrove.....	20	Post .....	32
Bang.....	8	Hamilton Elementary ..	20	Postma .....	45
Birkes .....	19	Hamilton Middle .....	30	Reed .....	49
Black .....	7	Hancock.....	38	A. Robison .....	48
Bleyl .....	23	Holbrook.....	44	Sampson .....	22
Campbell.....	29	Holmsley.....	18	Sheridan.....	35
Carlton Center.....	43	Hopper .....	47	Spillane .....	17
Cook.....	26	Horne .....	41	Thornton.....	45
Copeland.....	14	Jersey Village.....	26	Tipps.....	48
Cy-Fair.....	21	Jowell .....	13	Truitt.....	28
Cypress Creek.....	18	Kahla.....	54	Walker.....	38
Cypress Falls.....	27	Keith .....	32	Warner .....	12
Cypress Ridge.....	31	Kirk .....	40	Watkins .....	12
Cypress Springs.....	16	Labay .....	52	Willbern.....	23
Cypress Woods.....	36	Lamkin .....	34	Wilson .....	25
Danish .....	17	Langham Creek.....	50	Windfern.....	7
Dean.....	37	Lee.....	9	Yeager.....	24
Duryea.....	53	Lieder .....	15		