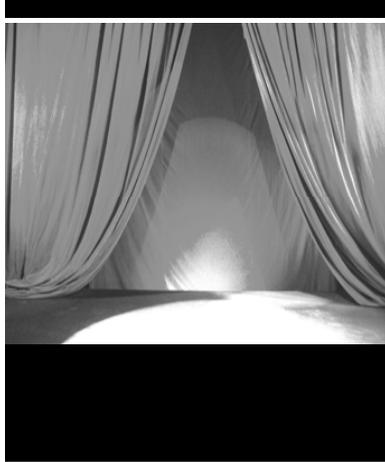


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**Volume XXVIII ♦ May, 2013**

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# 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

The annual *Spotlight* program in Cypress-Fairbanks—now in its 28<sup>th</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 2013 *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*.

*Although stories in this booklet may depict actual children,  
fictitious names have been used to protect privacy.*

## Instructional Strategist

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

### Turning the Frown Upside Down

Jessica Talamantez ♦ Alternative Learning Center East  
Chemistry, Physics, IPC, and Forensic Science

Leonardo da Vinci said it best, “Study without desire spoils the memory, and it retains nothing that it takes in.” When students are intrigued, learning becomes enjoyable and lasting. Students who walk into my class may come with failing grades and disengaged attitudes. I make it my job as a teacher to spark their curiosity and motivate them to learn.

Over the past couple of years, I have acquired differentiated learning techniques and incorporated them into my classroom. What I've noticed was beyond my belief. My students gradually began participating more, smiling, laughing, and motivating themselves and each other to do better. By implementing

more hands-on, manipulative-type activities, inquisitive demonstrations, and providing a variety of formative assessments, my students are achieving higher grades and discipline is no longer an issue.

My goal each year is to create an effective learning environment for my students. I love coming up with a hands-on activity for those who are struggling, urging students to use their creativity to build what they learned, and turning a class of talkers into collaborators discussing and competing to solve a problem. It is extremely difficult for our students to stay engaged, and I've learned sometimes all it takes is a smile, encouragement, and some fun!

### READ 180® ...Who, Me??!

Melinda Abel ♦ Arnold Middle School  
Grade 7 and 8 ♦ READ 180

When my teaching assignment shifted from 6<sup>th</sup> grade reading to READ 180®, a 7<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> grade intervention reading class, the word PETRIFIED barely described my outlook! Looking back now, though, fear was pushing me off course—comfort was the danger. My teaching had been lulled into that straight-highway, zombie-eyes driving trance. A well-ensconced routine had eroded passion for my content. Then, to make matters worse,

I knew I would be teaching students who had no love for my content, either.

After readjusting my feelings about the upcoming school year's itinerary, I *thought* I was ready to see class rosters. Wrong. Teaching an intervention class obviously meant that most of the D.M.C. regulars would be walking through my classroom door daily. How in God's green earth was I going to tackle this? Thankfully, my teacher's toolbox was full, and I was willing to open it. P.B.I.S.,

Quantum Learning, and B.B.R. steered me in the right direction. I was the one who needed roadside assistance. I learned that sometimes the nudge you need to find your way back to your passion is a wake-you-up, eyes-back-on-the-road, hands-on-the-wheel challenge. READ 180® teaches me about content; yes, but more than that, it revs up passion for my

students. They need me just as much as I need them. My students help me discover my true drive: teaching struggling readers and focusing on every little success. No matter how minor it seems to someone else, my strugglers achieve huge milestones worth celebrating at every checkpoint along the journey.

### Incorporate the Unexpected!

Jacqueline Heineman ♦ Campbell Middle School  
Grade 8 ♦ Science

Like so many teachers, I feel like I was born for this profession. I am also playful at heart. Have fun in the classroom? Make up silly stories? Let's do this!!!

Wearing wigs, rapping about coefficients, and pretending we're on the “Price is Right” is presenting the information in a memorable way. Engaging each and every student in some form or fashion is something that I try to do every day. Teaching has allowed me to become a lifelong learner, to share and demonstrate new and innovative ways to make connections that will last for more than a grading period. To see the light bulbs go on when information is understood reinforces why I was meant to teach.

Traditional methods and styles may

not translate in the classroom with children who may be accustomed to instant gratification and entertainment. When eyes and ears of the students are on the teacher, she owes it to them to deliver a concept with passion and create curiosity.

Playing music in class, dressing up, and laughing with the kids makes a classroom engaging. We are all in it together. Ecosystems, equilibrium, and energy transformations may not be received by all but give me a beat and let's see what happens.

Early in my career I remember being afraid to have fun while teaching. I feared it would get out of control, but I took a chance and discovered the students were having fun and I was, too. Incorporate the unexpected in a lesson and expect a lesson learned!

### Growing up Inspired

Heather G. Browarek ♦ Dorothy Carlton Center

12+ Lifeskills V.I.T.A.L. (Vocational and Independence Training for Adult Living)

Children often look up to professional athletes, teachers, coaches, political figures, and movie stars as role models for inspiration. For my entire life, my role model was my Mom. My Mom is a special education teacher and a truly inspiring woman. Throughout the years, I had the opportunity to get to know some of her students, their abilities and disabilities, and later in life hear

stories of the amazing progress they made. My mom always told me that if you create lessons that are fun, the students will enjoy learning and remember those lessons for the rest of their lives. On Sundays she spent her afternoons creating these lessons for hours, and she would remind me how it would all be worth it in the end. To me it appeared to be a lot of work.

During my college years, my Mom often suggested that I go into education. All I could remember were those long Sunday afternoons that she spent writing lesson plans, grading papers, and meticulously filling out paper work. I initially dismissed my Mom's advice; it took college and a few jobs to realize that my Mom was right. Education and teaching was for me!

I've been teaching special education for the past 4 years, and I cannot imagine a better job. I firmly believe that I hit the teaching jackpot. I currently teach a class called V.I.T.A.L. (Vocational and Independence Training for Adult Living). I am fortunate enough to accompany my

### **Art – It is Everywhere!**

**Gretchen Bell ♦ Hairgrove Elementary School  
Grades K through 5 ♦ Art**

When I plan what my students will learn and create next, I often have TONS of questions running through my head. I try to fit EVERYTHING in. Will they have fun creating this? How can I tie this lesson into what they need to know in math and science? Can I squeeze in some sort of writing, too? I want to make sure that my students are learning as much as they possibly can when they come to my class.

The elements and principles of art are synonymous with ALL content areas. Making sure that my students fully understand these basic elements and allowing them to have the freedom to be creative, enables my students to make amazing, original pieces of art that incorporate their learning both in my class and the other content areas.

students out into the community 3 periods a day and help train them for vocational life skills that can be applied daily. I love that I can see progress and growth both on personal and professional levels through the workplace. Lesson plans, paper grading, and paper work is challenging, but the reward outweighs any stress. I bring a lot of creativity into my classroom, and I still brainstorm with my role model. The one thing that I've found to be so true is the lesson that I learned from my Mom many years ago; students want to learn when lessons are fun and they will remember those lessons for the rest of their lives.

Recently, I taught a lesson that involved the solar system. We studied various images of the planets, moons, and asteroids. Through questioning strategies, they were able to identify the various light sources and shadows in the images and were able to apply that learning to their science and math. Once they had a strong understanding of how the planets are three-dimensional like a sphere and how the light sources affect the color and form of the planets, they were able to use their imagination and create their own outer space pictures with various crayon techniques. Their artistic accomplishments keep me inspired to continue incorporating all content areas in my lessons.

### **Let's Eat**

**Dianna Stephens ♦ Jersey Village High School  
Grade 9/ English I ♦ Grade 11/English IIISSL**

"Give a man a fish he eats for a day. Teach a man to fish and he eats for a life time."

I have discovered over the years that teaching is not for the faint of heart. It requires tenacity and grit. For the most part, we do not keep bankers' hours, and to be perfectly honest good teaching will not adhere to a strict regimental nine to five schedule. Instead, good teaching requires a resolve that gets many of us up well before the sun emerges, and takes us into the midnight hours, planning, hoping, and praying for a lesson's success.

Ever evolving, my growth as a teacher has taught me to recognize my students not as blank canvases but masterpieces. While I may not be the Renoir or the Picasso who created them, I understand that I have the

important task of helping them discover the perfect frame to enhance their beauty and talent. As a framer, if I thoughtfully prepare my lessons and activities, if I push my students to think, if I encourage active engagement in the learning process, success is imminent. The results are not always immediate, but my heart has been forever emboldened when my struggling student returned to see me and said, "Miss, do you remember me?" "I'm in college now, and I really need to improve my vocabulary. Do you still have the vocabulary lessons you used to teach us?"

We can give our students a fish, and they will eat for a day; or we can encourage our students to fish, and they are inspired for a lifetime.

### **9<sup>th</sup> Graders, Dickens, Book Club...Oh My!**

**Kristina Baker ♦ Langham Creek High School  
English I**

Over the course of my time at Langham Creek, my students have inspired me daily through their unique perspectives, insights, and personalities. However, this year, a wonderful, boisterous group of students led the entire English I team of teachers on a journey and proved to be the most inspiring group of young men and women that I have worked with to date.

What originally began as approximately 15 students wanting to read classic literature in a book club quickly turned into over 150 students choosing to read Charles Dickens for fun! Seeing students invite class mates to join book club, motivate their friends to keep reading through the difficult text, and ultimately analyze and discuss classic

literature with depth with no extrinsic motivation has been an experience I will never forget. Not only did my students inspire me through their curiosity and attention and excitement, but they inspired other English teachers as well.

As we conclude this school year, this small group of students has caused six English I teachers to come together to create innovative, intriguing book club lessons focused on learning and fun. Over 150 students participated in one of three optional book clubs focused on classic literature, and eight English II teachers began their own version of this program to foster a love for reading. "Spotlight Teacher" recognizes only one person, but in truth the success of each

teacher is dependent on those around her— students, teachers, administrators, and parents—but primarily her students.

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

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

### **I Love My Job**

**Lori Ruysenaars ♦ Adam Elementary School  
Grade 4 ♦ Math SEI and Math At Risk**

Building relationships with my students is the key that allows me to teach them. It is important that my students feel loved, challenged, and secure in the knowledge that I believe in them. This is important to me. I want to create a risk-free environment where all students can learn and want to learn. As a special education and at-risk teacher, I find many of the students I work with are afraid to take risks. So many times these students have been unsuccessful and have failed. I believe in celebrating progress daily no matter how great or small. Everyday students need to hear that they are smart and can be successful.

Every day while driving to work I reflect back on the prior day. My goal is to choose one student and make it a GREAT day for them. This might include finding a new way to teach a concept that they did not understand, helping them complete their homework, or just spending time talking to them. While in college, I had a professor tell the class, “Remember that students spend 7 hours a day with you and only 3-4 hours in the evening with their family. What kind of day do you want those students to have?” Every day I pray that I remember this and hope that I have the patience and wisdom to be the best I can be.

### **A Child’s Heart**

**Krystal Durham ♦ Ault Elementary School  
Grade 1 ♦ Self-Contained**

Growing up, I always knew I would be a teacher one day. Not until years later, would I reflect on what kind of teacher I would like to be. Most importantly, I have made it one of my top priorities to be a teacher that touches hearts. We hear the phrase often in education, “Once you have a child’s heart, you have it all!” I have found this statement to be very true! Not only have I experienced

it through the eyes of a young child, but also through the eyes of a teacher. I have strived to make my classroom a safe and comfortable learning environment, a place where students feel cared for and accepted, and a place where any student can thrive.

This year, I have been given one of my biggest challenges as a teacher: a child who does not speak the same language as I. I

could not imagine the feelings that he felt stepping into a classroom that was completely foreign to him. The small steps we took together to communicate-- whether it was just a smile, a picture card, or a few spoken words-- I knew that I had reached him.

By establishing a personal relationship with a child from the start, you can look to the future knowing that although there will be challenges ahead, you have won their heart and that is what will make a difference!

### **Reading is a Journey**

**Erika R. Adamec ♦ Black Elementary School  
Grade 4 ♦ Reading/Language Arts/Social Studies**

When I first started my teaching career thirteen years ago, I honestly had no idea of what to expect. Many questions came to mind. Would I love the profession I had chosen? Would I be able to carry out a well-planned lesson? Looking back, I can say to myself that without a doubt, I made the right career choice.

I love to teach. More specifically, I love to teach reading. Reading allows me to take my thinking about the plot and characters and share with my students how to get “lost” in the book through feelings and emotions. When my students see how imaginative and animated I can be with a book, they too become that much more involved in their own reading.

Reading was not always like this for me growing up. I remember feeling that reading, at times, was just a task, a chore that had to be done in order to get through the school day. I was not born a great lover of reading. I learned to love reading through my mentors, colleagues, and friends. That is the essence of what I strive to get across to my reading students each and every day.

To me, reading takes them along on an adventure. When your students see how passionate you are about reading, they too get excited. I feel my students follow me on that same journey. To many students, this is where their love of reading begins. It’s a lifelong journey. I believe a good reading teacher can have an everlasting impact on a child’s desire to read.

### **I Want To Have 25 Kids When I Grow Up**

**Rhonda Reid Callaway ♦ Cook Middle School  
Yearbook Advisor/Family & Consumer Sciences**

My inspiration to teach comes from the faithful women in my family. They were always positive, encouraging, productive, and spoke the truth in love. I have no memory of them speaking ill of anyone. My mother, grandmothers, and aunts truly loved and accepted people exactly the way they were. Their words taught me to think and do for myself. They showed that there was always something new to learn. And most importantly, they taught me how to

love and serve others. Their powerful words spoke life and instilled in me a can-do spirit bringing forth a potential that I could not yet see. These women made life joyful, creative, and vibrant. Children and young people held a special place in their hearts. They would smile knowingly when as a young girl I would periodically announce, “I want to have 25 children when I grow up.” They never discouraged me or told me it was

impossible. These are the things I hope to leave as a legacy for my students.

It gives me great pleasure to tell you that God has a wonderful sense of humor! Since I have “grown up” not only do I have 3 wonderful children of my own, but 6 periods a day, Monday through Friday, I am blessed

### **Show love. Spread joy.**

**Kara Orsak ♦ Copeland Elementary School  
L.I.F.E. Skills**

I have always believed that a smile goes a long way in life. I found this to be true growing up as a child when greeting a stranger and when encouraging others. Smiling is something I do continually throughout my workday. My students are constantly causing me to beam with happiness and joy. My classroom has a wide variety of students that face behavioral, cognitive, and physical obstacles daily. Knowing the challenges that they face day-to-day, I believe it is my purpose to create a classroom that is loving and supportive. I find no greater joy than to encourage my students and show them support through

### **Let Me Explain**

**Jill Talkington McCaskill ♦ Cy-Fair High School  
Chemistry K and L levels ♦  
Department Chair Science**

I only copy from the best.

Let me explain. I have been privileged to work with and be taught by many exceptional teachers. It didn't take me long to realize that I was in the company of masters. Why not grab all the knowledge I could carry and make it my own?

From my 4<sup>th</sup>-grade teacher Mrs. Pierce, I learned patience and the effect of praise. Being supremely knowledgeable of the subject material was shown to me by Mr. Smith, my 9<sup>th</sup>-grade biology teacher. The

to have those 25 children I always hoped for. *Words kill, words give life; they're either poison or fruit—you choose.* Proverbs 18:21 (The Message)

smiling, sharing a laugh, and most of all, hugging. It is my utmost priority to teach in an environment that is warm and loving. In setting this standard, amazing and beautiful things have happen in my classroom. Students work in an environment where they reassure, uplift, and support one another. In a classroom where not every student can hang up their backpack or request a drink of water, we (as a classroom) care and help one another daily. As a teacher, if I am the role model for how to care for and encourage others, than I truly have taught my students a life skill.

benefit of a good story to enhance relevance of a tricky concept was demonstrated by my entomology professor in college. Dr. Bricker, also at the University of Kansas, shared the tricks of how to learn the names of his 600 freshmen chemistry students. Developing relationships with students was a talent I observed while working with Dr. J.K. Lee in the chemistry department. Ms. Timm was a Zen master at breaking down difficult concepts into manageable, nonthreatening pieces, and she shared her

genius with me. Observing colleagues on the chemistry team when I first taught in CFISD was of immeasurable assistance and showed me the ins and outs of teaching this demanding curriculum.

Their expertise formed the backbone of my teaching philosophy. Every one of them

### **The Turning Point**

**Leslie Laird ♦ Cypress Creek High School  
English II L, K and SSL/Creative Writing**

Mohammad arrived in October when I was teaching 8<sup>th</sup>-grade language arts. He had been in resource ELA, but his counselor insisted that he didn't belong there, and asked to place him with me. I agreed, of course, and what a gift I received. Mohammad was a polite, quiet boy with a terrible stutter and a low IQ. He listened attentively, but never asked questions or volunteered, until he approached me anxiously with a dog-eared notebook and asked if I'd read some of his writing. He carefully turned down the pages he wanted me to critique; Mohammad's ideas were fantastic, but were buried in poor spelling, grammar, and a lack of organization. I made comments for him on post-its, not wanting to mar his careful thoughts. The next day we

made teaching look easy. E.P. Bertin said, “Teaching is leaving a trace of one's self in the development of another.” I owe my success to those teachers who did just that for me.

discussed my recommendations, and a pattern emerged. Sometimes, we'd work through lunch, but mostly, he'd leave me his notebook and I'd read his revisions, making remarks on the small yellow notes that had become our tutoring tool.

I thought of Mohammad often after he went off to high school with spelling and grammar to match his ideas, and was thrilled to find him on a college campus while I was attending a workshop. “I am a student here,” he said. “I am majoring in communications. I'm going to be a writer.” I smiled with tears in my eyes, thinking of how Mohammad inspired me to be student-centered, to look at each student and assess his needs.

### **My Inspiration**

**Julie Pitt ♦ Cypress Lakes High School  
Grade 11 ♦ U.S. History**

Hopefully, in every student's life there is one teacher who makes a lifelong difference. In my life, that teacher was Mrs. Hopkins, my 9<sup>th</sup>-grade biology teacher. Her teaching style was unique to say the least. She was never afraid to put herself out on a limb and act crazy if it would push us to think out of the box or do something we did not think we could do. Once, while we were dissecting frogs, she actually walked on the

tables singing songs about frogs. We thought she was absolutely crazy, but now I realize she was passionate and inspirational. She made learning fun and encouraged us to be leaders in and out of the classroom! Her high expectations and unique way of encouraging us to excel was a shining example of a positive, supportive, and inspirational teacher. I admired the way she was able to see my strengths as a student

and encourage me to see my future potential which helped me set future goals beyond her classroom. Throughout my teaching career, I have seen my own teacher-student relationships develop and mature as I try everyday to emulate her style. And yes, I do

sing a lot of songs about history! As a teacher, I know I will never be perfect, and I will make mistakes. But I hope in the future, my students will reflect back on my class and feel as though I made a difference in their life.

## Phun Physics

**Jeff Shull ♦ Cypress Ranch High School  
Grade 11 and 12 ♦ Physics and AP Chemistry**

The method of teaching that I enjoy most is the use of open-ended, student-driven projects. Projects vary from year to year based on what the students create and their interests, but I always have back-ups such as the following example when we get stuck in a rut of low creativity and we need a boost in the right direction.

*Finding the Mass of a Car* – This project was developed because students wanted a practical use of tape timer data. One of my students discovered a lab similar to this on the Internet, so we tried it. The idea of a tape timer was brought outside in this exploration. Students pushed a car with a constant force down a local street while dropping beanbags out of the passenger side

door at regular time intervals. The force was kept constant using simple bathroom scales! Students were left with data similar to a previously completed experiment used to find the acceleration due to gravity. Instead of dots on a piece of tape, they were left with beanbags on the side of the road. From this data, we calculated the car's acceleration and then the car's mass using the equation, force = mass x acceleration. The car's actual mass was found in the owner's manual and we discovered that physics worked again! The students love when they can apply the mathematics and concepts learned in class to large scale tasks. As a teacher, this led us directly into the next topic, forces and Newton's Laws.

## Finding Relevance

**Jeffrey Burnthorn ♦ Cypress Ridge High School  
Social Studies Department Chair ♦ Campus Math Coach**

Before we can make sense of new information, we must first understand how it connects to what we already know. Finding personal relevance in the content can help a student better understand new concepts and can also inspire them to strive harder for academic excellence. For example, I had a small group of students who had a long history of academic and behavioral struggles. After working to build a relationship with these students, it became extremely evident that they all had a passion for music. In an effort to help increase their

motivation to learn the curriculum, I challenged them to write and record a rap for their unit project on the *Rise and Fall of Communism in the Soviet Union*. They instantly became the hardest working students in the class. In addition to completing the assigned project, the students made an amazing video for their rap and presented it at the CFISD Technology Festival. I was so proud of them, not only for learning the material and completing the assignment, but also for their change in attitude and the personal

connections they made to the content. As teachers, we must purposefully plan so that we inspire our students. Once we can accomplish this, then true learning can start.

*"Information is just not going to rub off on someone who cannot conceive any use for it." -Dame Mary Douglas*

## The Perfect Leader

**Latrice Caldwell ♦ Emery Elementary School  
Grade 5**

This is the first time in my career that my mom, who very recently passed, was not there to pray for my students to do well on their big tests. Tough!!

On the first day, my dad said he would take my mom's place. Later, I opened a text from two teacher friends who said they were praying for us. My sister sent an e-mail saying she had prayed the night before. I was feeling pretty awesome, but nothing could top what I was about to see.

Before we got started, I returned from the office to find my student A.J. leading my class in prayer for that exam. All but two chose to join. It almost brought me to tears.

Later, A.J. expanded his invitation by asking my other class if any of them wanted

to join. I was surprised that almost all of them did. A.J.'s prayers were short, sweet, and to the point.

It took a couple of hours, and then tears came, and came, and continued to come. At that moment, I realized how much my mom's positivity had impacted me and my students.

We had become a family. In our classroom, they felt enough trust for one another and for me to freely express their thoughts, lead a group, walk independently, and make "out of the box" requests with confidence.

I am proud of my students, and I am proud to know that I provided a safe environment for them to become excellent.

## My Own Spotlights

**Cheri R. Smith ♦ Goodson Middle School  
Grade 7 Above Level ♦ Grade 7 and 8 Math Lab**

I am fortunate enough to teach a subject that I love, math. I have above-level students who shine and expand in their learning every day. I am also lucky enough to teach math lab. Each year I receive a group of students who are not very happy to be entering my classroom. They have lost an elective and have an additional math class, a subject that they have been unsuccessful in previously. They are angry, embarrassed, depressed, and discouraged. These characteristics are not a good foundation for setting an enriching and successful learning environment. I am faced with several

challenges, including the challenge of finding the right method or strategy to use so each child understands the concepts being taught. There is the challenge of presenting activities in a manner in which my children feel it is an extension of their original math class, not just more work. More importantly is the challenge of showing them that they can do math confidently and with some level of self-worth.

The challenges they bring give me the ability to see success and gain inspiration each and every year. I see success in their

faces when they come into the classroom with a 100% on a test. I see it in their growing confidence as they grasp concepts they thought impossible before. My success

## **FUN & GAMES!**

**Kerrie Turner ♦ Hamilton Elementary School  
Grade 4 ♦ Math**

Texas Roadhouse employees wear a shirt that states, “I ♥ My Job!” It never goes unnoticed. Those employees dance around and love having a good ole’ time while serving their tables. This energy trickles down to the dining experience. Well, I totally need this shirt! Each day, it’s my goal to serve students while making their learning meaningful through fun and games. Students are the heart of the school, and I know I’ve succeeded as their teacher when I provide them a learning experience not just a lesson.

I truly believe students only get as excited about learning as their teacher is about teaching. Teaching is like hitting the jackpot! Not only do I get to help students find their sparkle and “ah-ha” moments, I have permission to be a big kid and have fun with them. There is not a day that goes by that we’re not singing a silly song, rockin’ out dance moves, using manipulatives, implementing technology, writing on the tables, or playing a motivational game as we

## **Embracing the Whole Child**

**Sheridan Carey ♦ Hamilton Middle School  
Grade 8 ♦ Math/Algebra**

One hundred sixty middle school students come into my classroom each day. Some are struggling with a difficult home life, worried about their self-worth and place among peers, giddy with the excitement of young love or broken-hearted about being ignored by someone special. Some are filled

is seeing the pure joy on their faces when they find out they passed the math STAAR. My inspiration comes from my students. They are my very own spotlights.

problem solve and apply strategies. It’s always fulfilling to see students singing a math chant and choreographing new dance moves during recess after learning something new! Students are creative and energetic by nature. I feel it’s my duty to support their needs while continuously tapping into their world by providing exciting techniques in order to make curriculum connections and build relationships.

At the end of each school year, I often reflect upon the most rewarding moments. After several years of teaching, my answer has never changed...the kids! Celebrating their many successes, valuing each student as an individual, and having “fun and games” are essential to making OUR classroom an inviting atmosphere for learning. I absolutely LOVE my job, and I’m honored that it shows. Oh, and I do need that shirt!

with the anticipation of an upcoming athletic event, while others are worried about passing an important test. As a math teacher, I am responsible for developing meaningful lessons for this varied group, assessing their progress daily, and re-evaluating the direction of the next day’s

lesson. But more importantly, I strive to build relationships with these students who are our country’s future. This is the aspect of teaching that still excites me after all these years!

The teachers who made a difference in my life built relationships with me. They inspired my creativity and urged me to persevere in the face of obstacles. Small accomplishments eventually led to the realization of personal goals. Their belief in my bright future gave me confidence. Hard

## **Great Expectations!**

**Desiree Sabari-Lancaster, Ed.D. ♦ Hancock Elementary School  
Grade 4 ♦ Math ♦ Science**

Alex came to my class as a beginner English as a second language (ESL) and special education student with modifications. He left that year, exited from the ESL program and enrolled in the gifted and talented program for math. I often wonder about him. However, I know no matter where he has landed, he is doing something great.

I truly never envisioned myself as a teacher and came to it as a second career from social work. I ended up at an alternative certification meeting trying to help a friend. Later I found out that there was nothing wrong with her car at all. She saw something in me that I could not see in myself. “You would make a great teacher,” she said. I was comfortable being right

work, integrity, and accountability were values that I developed with the guidance of my parents and teachers. I have witnessed a similar blossoming of my own children through the efforts of so many dedicated, caring educators in CFISD. I strive to nurture and motivate my students with the same understanding, patience, and encouragement. Building self-reliant individuals who believe in themselves begins with relationships. I give 100% because I know each child deserves it!

where I was at that moment. Yet, she had greater expectations of me.

I believe that great expectations are the foundation of every successful classroom. As teachers we must not only establish those expectations but also cultivate them for each and every student. Many students do not come to us knowing their greatness or having ever been told that they are capable of greatness. However, each child we have the pleasure to teach should leave us knowing the magnitude of successes within them.

With strong relationships, consistent communication, and respectful honesty, there are no limits to learning and no fears to challenges. We are in the people business, not teaching just for grades but for greatness!

## **Building a Bridge to Success**

**Autumn Allison ♦ Holbrook Elementary School  
Grade 2 ♦ Reading ♦ Language Arts**

“Building relationships is the foundation for successful learning.” I live by this quote daily, because the more I invest in a student, the more successful they become.

When it comes to building relationships, one in particular has touched my heart. When he walked into my room on the first day of school I greeted him as he entered, “Good morning, I’m glad you are here

today.” Unfortunately, he kept his head down and continued walking to the closet to put away his backpack. As we began our day, I read Have You Filled a Bucket Today. All of a sudden, he looked interested. Afterwards, we had a conversation about him reading the book in Kindergarten. He had a lot of great things to say about filling other’s buckets. I knew then, this was the start of our relationship. As the days, weeks, and months went by, I continued building my

### **Smiling Faces and Little Hands** **Thea Schoen ♦ Jowell Elementary School** **Kindergarten (ESL)**

I love my job at Jowell Elementary. Where else can I work with wonderful people and enjoy the smiling faces of all my students? My little friends are always ready for a fun and exciting day at school. I strive every day to provide the perfect environment where my students feel safe, engaged, and excited to learn. I may not always know what is going on with a student at home, but my students will show me through their actions, smiles, and/or tears. In my classroom, I maintain a warm, nurturing, and safe environment. My students know that they can talk to me and I will listen. I encourage and applaud all students’ achievements and provide a shoulder to lean on during tough times.

### **My Patchwork Quilt** **Michele Jackson ♦ Kahla Middle School** **Grade 6 ♦ World Cultures**

My experiences have shown me that teaching is like a patchwork quilt that is made up of uniquely designed squares. Apart, these squares only give a section of the quilt, but yet when sewn together offer complementary patterns and a completed design. The construction of my quilt has gone through many changes over the years,

relationship with him. We talked about things he liked to do in and out of school.

Now he fills my bucket every day. My student takes pride in his work, tries his best, helps when a new student enters our classroom and shares with them how we fill each other’s buckets. Also, he greets other teachers and students daily with a smile.

I believe when teachers build meaningful connections with their students, they build a bridge to learning success.

Every day provides a new opportunity for me to inspire and challenge students. Our classroom is a place where children sing, rhyme, write, and read. We use manipulatives and fun projects to reinforce the learning concepts of the day. They think they are just having fun but I know they are learning.

I teach my students the importance of being a good friend, a respectful citizen, and a life long learner. I encourage them to explore their world. Our class motto is "IF you don't take a chance then you will never learn to fly!" This philosophy is the foundation for the beginning of reading and writing. Yes, it is scary, but failure is not an option in my classroom. I love my job!

from ridged geometric patterns to imaginative appliqués that are several layers thick. My pattern squares are full of sentimental memories. One square reminds me of my favorite teacher Mrs. Martin, who showed me that teaching is more than reading, writing, and arithmetic. Another square represents my mentor teacher Marlo

Neuhaus who carefully guided me during my first few years of teaching and taught me that extracurricular activities are just as important as what goes on before the final bell. Other squares not only serve practical and functional purposes, but many represent the relaxing and joyful times I share with students in student council

### **My Job is Awesome!** **Cindy L. Casillas ♦ Labay Middle School** **Grades 6 through 8 ♦ Band**

I love music and I crave excellence. I believe that responsibility and respect for others and one’s self are necessary for success and happiness in life. I’m thankful that I get to go to school every day and teach kids about all of these things through teaching band. I get to teach students who have never played an instrument before how to be musicians. Learning to perform music requires discipline, coordination, and knowledge. I am amazed all over again every year as I see another new group of students learning these skills. I get to teach kids how to achieve excellence. It requires hard work and perseverance, which are uncommon in today’s immediate gratification world. Working together in the band is a great way

### **Freedom** **Kate Wells ♦ Matzke Elementary School** **Grade 5 ♦ Language Arts ♦ Social Studies**

*Freedom: the right to enjoy all the privileges or special rights of citizenship or membership in a community (or classroom)*

As a teacher in a Title I school, I have provided tutoring in the mornings for my students all year. I am not a morning person and on one particular morning I was dragging my feet to the classroom and saw that several students were already at my door waiting. As I got closer they started to

events, at craft club meetings, and even when we eat together during lunch. I realize that my quilt will never be 100% finished. It reflects the mosaic of my career, memorable events, and the new knowledge and appreciation I continue to have for my profession.

for students to learn this process. Once they experience reaching success here, they will have a model to which they can refer in whatever they choose to do in their futures. I get to teach my students that every band member is valued for the unique qualities they bring to the group. They must all accept responsibility for each others’ success or failure, much as they will need to do as they enter the “real” world of work and family.

I am grateful for the wonderful teachers, co-workers, and students who have made teaching so very enjoyable for me. My hope for all of “my” kids is that they will continue to use the lessons they have learned in band to keep making music and to seek excellence in all aspects of their lives.

call out to me, “Mrs. Wells, you are here! We were worried that you were absent today, and we wouldn’t be free to get into our classroom.” I told them that it was a beautiful day and would they not prefer to be free outside? As I unlocked the door, they whooped and danced inside shouting, “Now we are free!” I was confused. “You are free outside,” I said. “In our portable, I have to lock the door. You are not free!” “Oh, but Mrs. Wells, we are free!” They all started

listing things. “Free to learn. Free to choose from the library. Free to discuss our books. Free to get in the comfy chairs and read!”

It was a powerful moment for me. One I was unprepared for. What more would we want than to create an environment of

## **We are Family**

**Nancy Edmonds ♦ Moore Elementary School  
Kindergarten**

What an honor it is to be able to spend every day teaching, counseling, and loving the vibrant souls of children in an attempt to instill a foundation and love for learning! Since I was a young child, teaching kindergarten was always my dream. At the beginning of every school year, I wonder what memorable experiences and challenges the new year will bring. Each child enters my classroom with a unique personal story, exhibiting various cultures and abilities, and the possibility of never having been in school before. Joy and fear consume me as I try to create a warm, comfortable learning community blending our individual life experiences.

We are a family from day one, learning

## **My Second Family**

**Mark Goodwin ♦ Postma Elementary School  
Grade 4 ♦ Math ♦ Science**

When I began my teaching career, I worked at a school where strong families were a commodity that many of my students did not have. Due to this unfortunate truth, many students were not willing to take risks in their daily life especially in their learning. I decided to start calling my classes "second families" where safety and support were the rule and not the exception. I believed that as a family we would take care of one another at all times and support one another in our successes and our areas of needed

freedom for our students? Each day, even the early mornings when I enter my classroom, I am walking into freedom, and when we are free to learn then the possibilities are endless.

to respect our differences, cultures, and abilities. We live by “The Golden Rule,” treating one another as we want to be treated, always feeling that we are in a safe place to learn and have fun *together*. With each skill that is mastered and each child that moves forward, I find myself again wondering what journeys my students will seek or if they will even remember kindergarten. The real joy is seeing former students return to say, “Hello,” or stop by for a hug to start their day. So many times, I am surprised at who steps through the door to see me! Often I wonder what is it that I did or said to touch your heart. As each child walks away, I am so thankful for how much joy and inspiration that child brought to me.

improvement. As the first "second family" school year progressed, I saw my students taking more and more risks within their learning and reaching higher than they previously had. There were sometimes steps backwards and times where "family meetings" were necessary to re-focus towards the goal. However, every success was ALWAYS celebrated and every opportunity for growth was evaluated. As I learned my students, I gave them opportunities to sow their gifts in learning to

one another in peer coaching. These opportunities not only grew the student doing the teaching in their own understanding, but grew the understanding of key concepts in the other student. Not all successes were able to be measured in a

## **A Student's Success**

**Pat Weiman ♦ A. Robison Elementary School  
Grade 5 ♦ Science**

The results were in and I found myself thinking back to our last of many tutoring sessions. While, always concerned about each of my student's test results, this time I was especially anxious about one particular student. The bell rang and my tutoring group gathered their backpacks and headed toward homeroom. A tiny girl with large brown eye slowly followed the taller kids and as she passed she looked me in the eye and quietly asked, “Do you think I can really do it?” Placing my arm around her shoulder I told her that I had absolutely no doubt about her passing the TAKS test. I had been telling her this for weeks, months in fact. I had been less than truthful. Doubts about her ability to pass TAKS constantly plagued me.

grade, and I feel by my blessing of having a strong family growing up and recognizing the need of ALL students to have the same allows for the "safety" needed for success.

Every strategy in my bag of tools had been used. Had I done enough, hidden my doubts successfully? In her I saw myself, a quiet, small girl from a large family struggling to close a somewhat short, but significant gap in her learning. Her gap was language related while mine was illness. While I don't think a single test can give a complete picture of a student, I knew this was a challenge this particular little girl needed to overcome. Having come so far I knew passing this test would be a much needed boost to her self-confidence. Scanning the results I found her name; she passed! Now she would know she could meet any challenge with confidence.

## **Our Classroom: Making Weird Cool, One Quirk at a Time**

**Megan Puckett ♦ Salyards Middle School  
Grade 8 ♦ U.S. History**

*“My house is me and I am it. My house is where I like to be and it looks like all my dreams.”*—The Big Orange Splot. When you walk into my classroom, it is easy to see that it's a little different: Harry Potter Legos line the book cases, stuffed tigers lounge about, there's a book case of my favorite books, and daily themed music playing from my iPod.

In my classroom, I start the year off telling my students that I'm a “different”

kind of teacher. They won't necessarily “get” me at first, but I will grow on them. I feel it's an important lesson—don't write someone off just because you don't understand them right away. Although students are wary at first, eventually my students embrace my quirks. They embrace my odd sense of humor, and even come to find me funny in a way that only people who know me can. More importantly though, my students then

embrace the memory tricks, raps, and analogies to my favorite fandoms (Harry Potter, Star Wars, Hunger Games). Any time I bring up Harry Potter my kids start laughing at/with me.

I find my students start to embrace their own quirks. They wear them proudly. Our classroom becomes a place where it is okay to be different. In fact it's always okay to be a little weird because there is no way you

## **Making Connections**

**Carrie Teague ♦ Sampson Elementary School  
Grades 4 ♦ Math**

Since I started teaching my philosophy on education has always been to make learning fun, to have all of my students fully engaged in the lesson, and to connect the curriculum to real world applications. For a subject such as math, this goal can sometimes be difficult to achieve. I have found that when I am able to incorporate a project into my lesson plan that shows the students why the skills I am teaching are important for them to learn, I am more successful at keeping my students engaged. For example, I was able to incorporate a Fantasy Football League into my classroom. I knew the boys would enjoy this activity, but was pleasantly surprised to find the girls did too! The students worked together in teams to manually calculate their scores, a calculation normally performed on computers in their parents' fantasy football

## **Me llamo Veronica**

**Kim Hardy ♦ Smith Middle School  
Grade 8 ♦ Spanish II**

A white girl with a bad accent who couldn't even roll her R's, how was she going to end up teaching Spanish? I knew I wanted to be a teacher since the third grade, but I

will be weirder than Ms. Puckett. One of my students who is generally wary of people who are different told me this year that I was "weird in a cool way." Students recognize being different and owning it is a good thing. Middle school is a tough place to be different, but in our classroom we wear our differences proudly.

leagues. I had several parents thank me and tell me how this project brought their families together on Sunday afternoons.

For another project, I asked the students to design a home floor plan. The students calculated the area and perimeter of each room in the home. We took the lesson a step further by creating a flooring budget and then we went shopping! The students had to figure out how to purchase all the flooring they needed for their house without going over budget.

I often thought that something I wanted to do in the classroom was too difficult, but my students have always risen to the challenge. I believe that my students learned so much from project like these and hope that I have made a connection to the real world that they will remember for years to come.

had always intended to teach math. Yes, I loved Spanish, but I lacked confidence in my new language and was hesitant to actually speak in Spanish.

I have loved Spanish since my first course in the seventh grade where my second identity was born, Me llamo Veronica. My name is Veronica. My newly chosen Spanish name would stick with me through all my high school Spanish courses where my love for the language was deepened even more by my two extraordinary teachers, Sra. Verraires and Sra. Crick.

The two had quite distinct styles. Sra. Verraires had a calm, caring, motherly demeanor, while Sra. Crick taught with boundless energy and moved a mile a minute. I remember all the fun I had in their classes – creating an infomercial for the Wishmaker 2001, chanting the irregular preterite verbs with La Noiva Presumida, cooking an Argentinian stew in a pumpkin, and learning the body parts with the song "Toca la Cabeza." They made learning exciting and engaging.

## **Our Classroom**

**Rebecca Vann ♦ Spillane Middle School  
Grade 6 ♦ World Cultures (Social Studies)**

"Bingo!" is probably one of my favorite things to hear. The morning of our test days I hold "Breakfast Club" to encourage my students to review for their test. All students are invited to attend the game format review session and are allowed to bring their breakfast. If you walk into *our* classroom you will see sixty-plus students chowing down on donuts, Chick-fil-A sandwiches, and McDonald's hotcakes, but what they're eating is not as important as what you see happening in the classroom. You will see students wanting to learn more, asking each other questions, and encouraging one another.

Every year, teachers are assigned a room that we call *our* classroom. But is it really *our* classroom? No, it's not. It's the students' classroom, and it's our job (and a

Yet, even with their influence, I started college as a math major. But I couldn't deny my passion forever. Within two years, I changed my major to Spanish and never looked back. My confidence grew in the language, my accent markedly improved, and yes, I can even trill my R's now!

In my classroom, I strive to emulate their qualities with my students. Thank you, Sra. Verraires, for introducing me to Spanish music and artists and teaching me how to create lasting relationships with my students. Thank you, Sra. Crick, for influencing my fast paced and boisterous style and for the songs and mnemonic devices I have stolen to use with my own students. It's a rare day when I don't have fun at my job. However, on those days, some student will make me smile or laugh and I think to myself, this is why I teach.

little bit of theirs) to make it interesting, inviting, and safe. Each year, *our* classroom is transformed into a Mexican market, a rainforest, a tour bus, and we've even "visited" China. Sure, it's time-consuming to set up all of these props, but it's completely worth it when my students walk in saying, "Ms. Vann, why is our room arranged like this? What are we learning about now?"

Everything that we do as educators, whether it's decorating a room, playing a game, welcoming students each day, or dressing up for a lesson, has a purpose. That purpose is to make sure our students are engaged problem solvers who feel safe and comfortable in any environment. By designing *our* classroom as I do, I am ensuring that my students can focus on

being successful at their job which is to learn.

## **Builder of Dreams**

**Roberto Pellon ♦ Thornton Middle School  
Native Speakers**

Every single day, the students in my Native Speakers' classes inspire me with the depth of their unrivaled determination. That determination evokes a passion within me to open the world beyond Thornton Middle School and the neighboring

community to the possibilities that lie within them. When asked recently about my own dreams I replied, "When you are a teacher, you are a part of dreams bigger than your own. I dream to be a builder of my students' dreams."

## **Books that Bind**

**Jennifer R. Buchert ♦ Warner Elementary School  
Grades 5 ♦ Language Arts/Social Studies and HORIZONS Liaison**

I love words. I love books. My students will confirm this. Read-aloud is unequivocally the best time of the day (I think my students will confirm this, too!). It's our bonding time as a class - a few minutes a day when we're all literally and figuratively on the same page. I'll project the book on the screen and off we go! Depending on the reading, we're passing Kleenex boxes around the room, analyzing literary devices, or debating heatedly after a particularly stirring chapter. I marvel at the meaningful, student-led discussions we have together.

This September, I shared the book *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio as a read-aloud with my classes. It is about a fifth grade boy named August (Auggie) who, because of multiple birth defects, has a disfigured face. After being homeschooled, he goes to a

"regular" school for the first time and learns to cope with his new environment full of friends and unrelenting foes. One of the main messages in the story is to "choose kind." This novel and its message really struck a chord in most of my students. One of my boys, a reluctant reader, told me he never would have read the book on his own because it was so long, but hearing August's story made him want to be a better brother and friend. Seeing my fifth graders' empathy and investment in the character struck a chord in me as well. They *still* quote the book from time to time.

Watching children learn and take steps toward becoming good people, life-long readers, and productive, problem-solving adults is remarkable and gratifying. Teaching through literature is so powerful, and I am lucky to get to do it every day.

## **A Teacher's Passion**

**Jessica L. Salinas ♦ Watkins Middle School  
Grade 7 ♦ Mathematics**

My job, my career, is about helping people achieve greatness. What could be

better than that? When I was growing up, I always wanted to be a teacher. Assisting

others to be effective and looking for avenues so everyone can be successful is my passion. Growing up, I used to "practice" being a teacher. I had my own chalkboard, grade book, and worksheets in which I would "play school" as I called it. I even forced my neighbor to be my student! Teaching is something I have always loved, believed in, and practiced.

One quickly realizes that teaching isn't simply about writing things on the board and having every student nod in unison that they understand. Teaching, for me, is about building relationships with all my students and challenging them to be the best they can be. Teaching is about caring for my students and understanding who they are. Teaching is realizing students learn differently from one another and students need avenues for them to be successful. My role is to provide those opportunities and incorporate them into my daily repertoire.

Watkins Middle School is a wonderful campus to practice this philosophy. I have always had the confidence to know I could

take risks in implementing new approaches with the support of my team and my administration. My students have become the beneficiaries of this approach which is to allow them to grow and be challenged in their learning. Seeing my students flourish allows me to know that finding different approaches is worth the effort we all put into our students.

As I reflect on my teaching, I can tell that a great teacher has to build a relationship with the student first. Above all else, the student and I need to find a common thread with which we can build a terrific tapestry together. There will be days when we will celebrate their successes and days when we will reflect on what didn't work so well; there will be days when I will challenge them to reach outside their comfort level and days when we will laugh together about life and its amusements. In the end, I know I chose the right profession to be involved in as each student knows I am committed to their success.

## **The Journey Begins Now!**

**Ben Abrams ♦ Windfern High School  
Grades 11 through 12 ♦ Geometry ♦ Algebra II ♦ Math Models**

Life is created by the moments that we choose to experience or not experience. I have been blessed with more experiences in the first forty years of my life than most. Losing both of my parents by the age of twenty-two is one of those experiences. Don't get me wrong, there are times I wished my parents were still around to see the man I've become. However, that loss has allowed me to connect with more than one of my students in the past and make a difference in their life, reminding me it was worth every ounce of heartache. On the contrary, if I didn't have those students' trust, that connection may never have happened.

My philosophy on a successful classroom environment revolves completely around investing time and emotion in every student. How can you possibly make a difference in the life of a student when you don't know anything about their life? Building that relationship becomes essential. With the relationship will develop trust, with trust comes an environment conducive to higher learning. Upon getting to know each student, I can not only find ways to relate the math to make it important to them, but I can also challenge them to reach a potential they may have never known they had.

I truly believe every student "wants" to be successful regardless of what their outward actions might otherwise imply. My goal is getting those students from wanting success to achieving success. Many of the students we get at Windfern have never experienced real success especially in a math

class. I strive for my class to be a journey that begins with small steps of success and concludes by opening a world of limitless possibilities.

*"I'm not a teacher: only a fellow traveler of whom you asked the way."* - George Bernard Shaw

mom would always find a way to make me add, subtract, divide, or multiply. Whether it was figuring out unit price or calculating our total cost before reaching the register, she always made our outings a learning experience. She turned traveling into a social studies lesson where I would have to find license plates from the lower 48 and name an interesting fact about that state. This became "our" game.

My mother nurtured my love of reading with books like *Goose Goofs Off* and *Robot PS3* during my developmental years. As I grew older she enjoyed my enthusiasm as I returned from my trips with

Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, and Harper Lee's *Boo Radley*. She listened as I made comparisons and connections with characters and asked me plenty of questions that required me to think along the way. She still wants to know about the books I am reading, and she has not stopped asking me why. My desire to continue to learn and inspire my own children and students to be life-long learners is a direct result of the love, support, nurturing, and commitment I received from my mother.

## 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.*

### Pride and Proficiency

**Robin R. Tankersley ♦ Alternative Learning Center West  
PACE ♦ Spanish I, II, III ♦ Native Speaker Spanish II**

This week I was asked to describe a time of inspiration that I have had as a teacher. I have spent countless hours pondering exactly what to write and how to write it in only 250 words. How do you choose just one story when every year, every month, *every week*, someone goes out of his or her way to inspire you?

I am often honored with updates from my former students, pleased to tell me that they have decided to continue with what for me is a passion, the Spanish language. Several have gone on to study abroad in college, and even more have chosen to major or minor in Spanish. Within the last year, I have had former students contact me from Mexico, Costa Rica, Argentina, and Spain where they have continued studying the language. They often ask me for

recommendation letters for foreign language scholarships, volunteer programs, and employment. Many are now doctors, nurses, engineers, and yes, even teachers, proud to call themselves bilingual.

As educators, there is nothing more fulfilling than seeing our students, *our babies*, succeed. For me that means following them as they learn their first words, "hola," "gracias," and "adios," until they become proficient in Spanish communicating as educated adults. After only twelve years of teaching, I am proud to have seen hundreds of students become proficient in the language when only one would have made my entire career worthwhile. My students have been my inspiration. What teacher could ask for more?

### My Greatest Inspiration

**Shelita D. Balderas ♦ André Elementary School  
Grade 5 ♦ Reading ♦ Language Arts ♦ Social Studies**

My mother was my very first teacher. As long as I can remember she always turned

every occasion into an opportunity to learn. When we would go grocery shopping my

### Suit Up and Show Up

**Cheryl Enick ♦ Aragon Middle School  
Special Education ♦ Adaptive Behavior**

My story doesn't start with me dreaming as a young child to become a teacher, much less a special education Teacher. As with most special educators, I didn't find this job; it found me. I have quickly come to realize that this is where my heart lies and have found my true passion in life. Each and every day I consider myself fortunate to be able to work with the students that I do and be surrounded with the professionals that I am and be in the supportive environment that I am.

A few years ago I noticed that there

were those around me that were happier, more content, and having more success in their classrooms than others. The difference seemed to be that they gave 100%. So I tried it. Every day I try to leave what I can at the door and put in a full day teaching my students. By taking this small action and putting in the effort every day, I realize that I am creating opportunities for good things to happen. If my students have to show up every day, then I have to show up. They deserve nothing less. You get what you give. Could it be that simple? Yes.

### Smiles are Contagious

**Cherish Hughes ♦ Birkes Elementary School  
Grade 4 ♦ Self Contained**

Smiles are contagious. I want my students to feel comfortable and to know they are walking into a warm and welcoming environment. I believe one of the best ways to educate children is to lead by example with a smile on my face. If I focus on being a

positive role model while expressing a love for learning, then my students will imitate that behavior. I encourage my students and treat them in a way that promotes confidence. I want to empower kids to be the best they can be by modeling a positive

attitude about learning. Children need to shine every day even if they are displaying the smallest improvements. I show the kids how excited I am about their achievements with big actions. I think it is important for every child to feel good about themselves. I am their biggest cheerleader. I promote that

## **I'm on a Mission**

**Stephanie Spiller Coleman ♦ Bleyl Middle School  
Grade 8 ♦ Science**

Wow! What a joy it is to be doing a job you love! I'm doing ministry for God, and it feels good. I can't tell people enough how God has blessed me to reach and teach His children. As I think back on my experiences as child in school, it was those teachers who cared and had a passion to teach that made such an impact in my life. I hope that in that same spirit and passion for teaching, I too am contributing in my students' future success in reaching their goals.

My students have been instrumental in igniting my passion to want to provide a positive learning experience for each child who crosses my path. In order for my students to grow, I try to build them up sharing what I know and my life's

they ask question and have respect for themselves, and I challenge them to take risks. By celebrating with my students and teaching them that through a great education they can achieve anything, I leave work every day with a smile on my face.

experiences. I want students to feel safe, valued, and loved in their learning environment, and when they enter my classroom they feel just that.

I come from a long line of educators, and they have paved a way for me to be a positive role model for students. I'm thankful for my husband Darryl and my children Trevor and Sydney for sharing me with my students and encouraging me to be the BEST teacher I can be. Being "Spotlight" teacher is certainly an honor, and I know my peers and students value my contributions. However, I must never forget...I'm on a mission to teach, encourage, and ignite a passion for all students to succeed.

## **"Showing the Way"**

**Jim Draudt ♦ Cypress Falls High School  
Grade 9 through 12 ♦ Physical Education ♦ Head Basketball Coach**

I have been an educator for over forty years, and my greatest contribution to my students and players has been that of a positive role model. I developed a strong work ethic and a sense of community from my parents. They were hard working and willing to help others. They always stressed the importance of doing what was right. I have tried to live my life by the examples my parents taught me.

Through my years as an educator, I have taught and coached kids from all different backgrounds. Many had great family situations, and many others had great obstacles to overcome. I have always tried to instill the willingness to fight and persevere through whatever comes your way. I have encouraged that they should have the persistence and resilience to meet any challenge head on. Teaching students to compete and strive to be the best is

important. I let them know that everything in life is attained through hard work and dedication. Teaching the values of trust and responsibility always helps my students and athletes reach their full potential. My greatest success has been seeing so many

## **Overcoming Life's Challenges**

**Kathryn Clark ♦ Cypress Springs High School  
English II**

As a student, many of my most memorable teachers were my English teachers. Being a lover of literature and recreational reading, I naturally enjoyed their classes and their company during and after school from junior high school through college. Mrs. Theresa Blank was my eighth-grade English teacher at Klein Intermediate. It was in her class that I truly started to learn about the challenges of school and the pride felt when those challenges are overcome. I remember completing MENSA puzzles, learning about Greek and Latin roots, and reading Farewell to Manzanar, my introduction to the sad history of Japanese internment camps. Although I didn't always appreciate her at the time, I owe much of what I later completed to these

former students be successful in their adult life. The greatest satisfaction is when a former student or athlete comes back and thanks me for being a positive influence in their life.

relatively benign learning experiences. I still enjoy brain teasers, I competed in a Spelling competition in high school, and I still enjoy reading pieces of literature rooted in history. She was one of many who touched my life along my educational journey. Later, as a colleague in my first years of teaching, I saw how she continued to live with the same fighting spirit. She is one of the reasons I hold my students to higher standards and why I challenge them and encourage them to push through life's obstacles. Without her showing me how to push through and help myself, I don't think I would have made it this far. I only hope that I can help my students push through in the same way she pushed me.

## **Embracing Their Potential**

**Charissa Buchhorn ♦ Danish Elementary School  
Grade 5 ♦ Science**

As a student, I had many great teachers, but when I think of those that left a great impression on me, Mrs. Sheppard is at the top of the list. Growing up, I was your typical good student. I followed the rules, completed my work on time, and earned good grades. Mrs. Sheppard stands out in my memory because she nurtured my desire to be a leader, to be something **more** than average.

She took time to help me develop parts of my character that would make me not just a good student, but also a productive member of society. She acknowledged my ambition, giving me extra responsibilities, classroom jobs, and even going so far as to teach me advanced math concepts in her free time just because I asked. She saw the potential in me and never let me waste an ounce of it.

As a teacher, I have the awesome responsibility of encouraging my students to challenge themselves to set goals worthy of the greatness they hold inside them. I want all my students to know that they have the

## **Mustang Pride**

**Amanda Dalton Carlin ♦ Dean Middle School  
Theatre Arts ♦ Teen Leadership**

When I think about people who have influenced my teaching career, I do not have to look further than the walls of my favorite middle school Berta Dean. As a new teacher, I was blessed to have master teachers that took me under their wings and instructional leaders who empowered all to do their best. From my first mentor who taught me to teach to my students' strengths by writing scripts for them, to custodians who drop whatever they're doing to assist anyone in need, and especially to the teachers that bleed Mustang Blue, like me, I am grateful. I love the fact that each adult in the building is a helper to others, whatever their job may be. What awesome role models these people

## **A Breath of Fresh Air**

**Giannina Berrios ♦ Duryea Elementary School  
Grade 2 ♦ Language Arts ♦ Social Studies**

Each morning, he walked in like a breath of fresh air wearing his polished shoes, his dark suit and tie, and a crisp, clean white shirt. His blue eyes sparkled as he smiled and greeted each of us in his second grade class. In Mr. Palazzi's eyes, we were all special. Each of us felt smart, respected, and perhaps, most importantly, loved. As I sat in his classroom, I remember hanging on his every word and wondering how one person could be so brilliant.

That special teacher not only taught his students with love and respect, but he treated the parents of his students with the

ability to achieve whatever they set their minds to. I am truly blessed to work in a job that I can have a part in motivating young people to embrace their potential.

are for our future generation. As corny as it may be, I went into teaching to make the world a better place. When you walk through the halls, it is plain to see these teachers, coaches, and staff members share my goal. So many good things happen at Dean every day and it's all because each staff member has said, "Today, I will make the difference in the life of a child." These people are my heroes. They inspire me *daily* to help build an environment to nurture, guide, and love our precious gifts we're entrusted to grow every day. No one knows what the future holds for these students, but I do know they're in very good hands during their middle school years.

same kindness. As a child of non-English speaking parents, I remember the parent conferences I was asked to translate. How fortunate for me to have had the gift of hearing Mr. Palazzi's kind, uplifting words, and then having the honor of translating them for my parents into our native Spanish.

When my teaching career is said and done, my hope is that I will have positively influenced the lives of all my students and that there will be those who will remember me with the fondness and respect that I will always have for Mr. Palazzi. I have had the pleasure of living my dream of teaching and

I cannot imagine doing something other than this work I was called to do.

## **Such Inspiration**

**Lisa Kitzmann ♦ Emmott Elementary School  
Kindergarten (All Subjects)**

First grade was the magic time for me. I knew that one day I would become a teacher like Ms. Pruitt. She was a very inspiring teacher who made learning fun. I knew that one day I wanted to inspire children the way that she inspired me.

I have discovered that teachers have the best job of all. Teachers get to share in the lives of children every day. Children look up to us as we share with them the love of learning. It is rewarding to see the excitement when learning finally comes together and students understand how to read, write, add, or complete any new task. My goal as an educator is to teach them not

only how to learn, but to love learning.

It is also our responsibility to be role models and collaborate with fellow teachers. I discovered after a few years of teaching that I had learned many valuable "tricks of the trade" or qualities from my colleagues. My teaching skills continue to change and grow every day. Our experiences shape who we are and we get to provide those experiences daily to our students and fellow teachers. I am truly honored to be recognized as a spotlight teacher, and I hope to inspire not only my students, but also my fellow teachers through the experiences that happen every day.

## **"Celebrate EVERYday!"**

**Angela E. McElroy ♦ Fiest Elementary School  
Kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> Grade ♦ Art ♦ PPCD**

I celebrate daily the inspiration that comes from sources both positive and negative. I am frequently reminded that I would not be the teacher that I am had I not been shaped by educators on both sides of this spectrum and had I not realized the value in those contrasting examples. My fifth-grade teacher shared personal stories of triumph and sometimes tragedy, was a 'stickler' for grammar, and never let us part without her warm hug and confidently-spoken expression, "I love you." My fourth-grade teacher, just a year earlier, was the source of more self-degradation than any student should experience. *I* experienced this as a result of her teaching.

For each and every one of my one-thousand-plus students, I make the same

choice to be the source of their individual celebrations, to provide the backdrop, the curriculum, and the love, or to be the barrier between them and their enthusiasm, their confidence, and their lifelong love of learning. Our daily 'celebrations' begin just outside the door of our art room as I consider the power of my smile, my tone, my 'hi-fives,' and my hugs. My assessment data comes in the form of 'art love letters,' returned hugs, and "I missed you, Mrs. Mac!" Our Fiest Elementary campus' celebrations come in our shared beliefs in the ability of all children to think beyond the obvious, to seek challenges rather than to avoid them, and to be excited about the outcomes of problems for which our students have solved themselves.

## **A Purpose for Teaching**

**Ashley Gallardo ♦ Francone Elementary School  
Grade 3 ♦ Reading ♦ Language Arts**

When I think back in my life and about the teachers I've had, there's one teacher that always puts a smile on my face. When I was in elementary school, I had a difficult time reading at the same level as my peers. I often felt self-conscious when I was asked to read aloud to the class because I lacked confidence in myself.

Then, in sixth grade, everything changed. My reading teacher looked at me and told me I could do anything I set my mind to. She empowered me and never gave up on me. Most importantly, she never let me give up on myself.

## **Becoming a Leader**

**Sylvia Rivera ♦ Hemmenway Elementary School  
Prekindergarten ♦ Bilingual Teacher**

Throughout my teaching career, I've played the role of leader and follower. I believe both roles are essential for success as an educator. In fact, it is how you conduct yourself in either role that develops your professional values and norms, and shapes your personal qualities.

As a Pre-k classroom teacher, I find it fundamental to share these roles with my students. Typically, I begin the year being the first in line, the loudest singer to *Eency, Weency Spider*, and the one modeling rules and routines in the classroom to my students. As the year progresses, there is a shift in roles. I am no longer the loudest singer in the classroom. It is also evident when my student helper says, "Mrs. Rivera, I am the line leader. Remember, I know where our stopping points are in the building!"

On my journey to becoming a teacher, I promised myself that I would try to always encourage, empower, and inspire my students. I've strived to be the positive role model in my student's lives because I want them to know that I will always love and support them. My students give me purpose and make me work harder for them every day. Years from now, my students may not remember every lesson they learned, but they will always know that they each own a piece of my heart.

The change in role is also apparent when a new student enrolls mid-year in our class and all 20 students insist on being the new student's helper. They say, "Mrs. Rivera, I will show our new friend how we do things in the classroom."

By the end of the year, my students are not only comfortable in their learning environment, but they have established values and norms associated with being good citizens. One reason for this is the opportunity they have had in playing the roles of leader and follower. Participating in both roles also results in my students' flourishing personal qualities of trust, responsibility, persistence, optimism, and respect for self and others. They become the role models for the next generation of Prekindergarten students.

## **A Late Bloomer**

**Terri Smith ♦ Holmsley Elementary School  
Grade 3 ♦ Math ♦ Science**

I never thought I would be a school teacher. I moved quite a bit as a child of a Naval officer. I was terribly shy, always behind the other students, and, frankly, I felt pretty academically inadequate. School was not a place I longed to be a part of after I graduated. So I chose to attend college to earn a finance degree and enter the field of banking.

It wasn't until I volunteered at my daughter's school that I felt a "calling" to teach. I would often help teachers by working with struggling students. These are the students I looked forward to seeing each week. I saw so much of myself in them! Children will share themselves with you if you show that you truly care for them. When I was asked if I would like to work at Holmsley, I accepted a position as a paraprofessional and soon enrolled in classes to become a certified teacher. I did this so that I could become a role model for those struggling students I worked with each day.

A role model is someone who lives their life by setting an example for others to follow. As a teacher, I know that each day I

have the responsibility of being a positive role model for the students in my class. Developing relationships with my students is just the beginning. I strive to make sure they know I have high standards for each of them, and I am consistent with my expectations. I hold myself to those same standards. I know that my students will say I am tough, but every student knows that I love him or her. They know I want them to be successful in life (not just in third grade). I have the opportunity to teach so much more than what the state says I am required to teach. Integrity, pride, and empathy are modeled and talked about often in my classroom. As an educator, I know I am examined closely every day by many impressionable young children.

I am now in my fifteenth year at Holmsley. My own girls have graduated from high school and are in college. I am blessed to have a small role to play in the lives of my students, and I pray that I am providing the best example of what a caring adult should be. Being a late bloomer can be a good thing!

## **Inspiring my first student**

**Dawn LaGrou ♦ Hopper Middle School  
Grade 6 through 8 ♦ Art**

Over twenty years ago, I began my career as a teacher. I was a fresh face and an eager beaver. I was ready to tackle any educational task that came my way. My first assignment was at a K – 12<sup>th</sup> grade school in Normangee, Texas. As a special education teacher, my career started with one small classroom, students ranging from 1<sup>st</sup> - 8<sup>th</sup>

grade, and about 5 preps per class period. I was extremely excited, busy, and exhausted. My classes were full of inspiration, challenges, laughter, and delight.

Gwen was a 6<sup>th</sup> grader at the time, and I really felt as though she was misplaced. But, what did I know; I was a brand new teacher, fresh out of college, a newbie, etc. Sticking

with my gut feelings and my belief in Gwen, I referred her for testing, and she was released from special education services. We (Gwen, her Aunt Rhonda, and I) worried about Gwen and future testing and regular classroom instruction for years to follow. However, Gwen showed us she was totally up to the challenge.

The first letter I received from Gwen was a “this is why I teach” type of letter. She thanked me for supporting and believing in her abilities and for being a role model. That is when she also let me know that she was graduating high school and headed to Sam Houston State for an elementary education degree.

## **A Smile**

**Megan Tonkinson ♦ Horne Elementary School  
Grade 1 ♦ Language Arts**

A smile changes the way you feel, the way you think, and how you interact with others. I try to remember a point from Jon Gordan’s book, The Energy Bus, every day in my classroom. No matter what else is going on around me, I know that my smile is the first and last thing my students will get to see every single day in my classroom. I think the tone and mood of my classroom drives the events for the whole day. Kids

will be more motivated and excited to learn in a fun and safe environment. Being a role model by having a positive attitude and infectious energy lends itself to having positive students that want to learn. Jon Gordan inspired me to notice that I will have challenges in the classroom, but the answer to overcoming these challenges is positive energy!

## **Relentless**

**Soraya N. Lalmansingh ♦ Kirk Elementary School  
Grade 4 ♦ READ 180**

When she was in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, she kicked and screamed while being carried out of the classroom. What a challenge she was for me in 5<sup>th</sup> grade! She had everything I expected, attitude, laziness, and disrespect. However, she had everything I didn’t expect too, brains and personality. Immediately, I noticed her bubbly personality and her conflicting attitude. She worked hard but pushed every button. Students are required to put forth great effort because nothing other than their best would be accepted. During class, I gave high fives or hugs which she never accepted. She told me not to touch her. However, I can recall a specific turn of events. I was in the hall as students came to

class. Some offered hugs and others said, “Hello.” She came up to me and asked for a hug, too. I reminded her that she told me not to touch her. Her specific words to me were, “I know, but I give up, you are relentless!” I told her she was right that, “I am relentless and that I would always expect her best.” We hugged.

I became her mentor after 5<sup>th</sup> grade. She is now a freshman at Cy Ridge. We visit each other. She keeps me updated on grades, personal issues, and successes. She makes sure I attend her track meets, too. As a matter of fact, I am on my way to Cy Ridge to watch this very special student at her district track meet. I’m sure to get a hug.

## **My Calling**

**Julia Yates ♦ Lamkin Elementary School  
Elementary Life Skills**

I didn’t know it at the time, but I was born to be a teacher and a life skills teacher at that. My family says that I was always a little tomboy. Perhaps that was just a nice way of saying that I didn’t fit the typical “prissy” little girl image, the one who wanted to be the princess in the fairy tales and play with dolls.

First of all, I was born a redhead. That should just about say it all. Being a redhead meant that I had to be defensive from the onset. I was called “carrot top” among other nicknames, all I perceived as derogatory and worthy of my attention! Oh, yes, did I mention that I also was the younger sibling to a boy? In addition, I grew up in a neighborhood with only boys for playmates. I could go sit in my room and play with dolls (ugh!), or I could pick up a stick and learn how to keep up with the guys. We all rode the bus to the elementary campus together, and true to my nature, I took it upon myself to make sure everyone was treated fairly, especially those who I felt couldn’t take up for themselves. My first run in with the law (the school administration) was when I took it as my job to defend a special education student who rode our bus and who was constantly harassed by the other students on the bus. I kept trying to appeal to their senses, but when that didn’t work, I resorted to physical force. That’s what got me into the trouble and off the bus for a couple of days.

I have always sympathized with the less fortunate and taken up for them.

My dad’s mother was a teacher at the State School for the Blind in Austin, Texas, and I suppose I absorbed some of her empathy. In fact, I come from a line of educators. My mother’s mother was a first-grade teacher for forty-one years and claimed to come from a *long* line of tutors dating back to the Middle Ages in England. Then my father and mother were both teachers as well as my mother’s sister. They were everywhere, so when the time came for me to choose a profession, I just *fell into* teaching. In high school, one of the service activities of a club of which I was a member was helping the life skills teachers in their classroom. I discovered how much I loved helping and learning from them.

In fact, I have been blessed to have so many mentors that have taught me how to become a better teacher. I interned in an elementary classroom with a wonderful teacher. I watched her and copied everything I could about her teaching style.

My first two years of teaching, I taught at a special education coop. There I was surrounded by fabulous mentors that played a key role in my educational development.

My parents taught me at a young age that one should always leave things a little better than how you found them. This concept has become my life’s goal. I want to leave this world a little better because I was here. I truly think that the best way to accomplish such is to have a positive effect on the lives of the children that we in the educational field interact with.

## **This day is prepared for me and I am prepared for this day!**

**Regina Butler ♦ Lee Elementary School  
Grade 1 ♦ GT (self-contained) all subjects**

A time for success for me is now! My life has not always been easy; however, with the

love and support of my family and past teachers who served as positive role models,

I was able to overcome many obstacles to get to this point. This sparked the desire to make a difference in the world. I always felt like there was more for me to do in life, but was unsure of which path to take. I realized with the help of my husband that I understood children and really connected with them. So, I decided to follow the path of teaching. Once I embraced the calling of teaching all the pieces of the puzzle began to fall into place. The searching was over and now I feel complete. Knowing that the students that I am entrusted with each day come from various backgrounds, I believe

### **Big Shoes to Fill**

**Katie Alderman ♦ Lieder Elementary School  
Grade 2 ♦ Language Arts ♦ Reading**

I have always wanted to teach, but it was during my high school junior year that I learned what kind of teacher I wanted to become. My English teacher Mr. De met every student each day with a handshake. He would say, “You can tell a lot about a person and the day they are having with a handshake.” He made the effort to get to know every individual student; everyone had a positive connection with Mr. De. Even students who normally had little motivation in school wanted to do their best for him. He truly inspired everyone. Unfortunately, his influence was not apparent until he was gone. Mr. De passed away suddenly that year. I was asked to speak at the school’s funeral service. Though I was petrified of

### **We are Partners**

**Carol Allen ♦ Lowery Elementary School  
Grade 5 ♦ Math**

I grew up in a large family where children were a priority. I spent many hours pretending to be a teacher. Being around children all day just felt natural to me, and I couldn’t imagine being anything else. I was

wholeheartedly that it is my daily responsibility to be a positive role model in their lives by loving, supporting, and equipping them with the knowledge that they need for life, not just academics. It is through my modeling that I passionately impart love, encouragement, and compassion that enables them to conquer life’s challenges. One of my favorite quotes that I believe speaks to my life is, "Success is...knowing your purpose in life, growing to reach your maximum potential, and sowing seeds that benefit others." - John C. Maxwell.

public speaking, I would have done anything for Mr. De. As I stood behind the podium, I was overwhelmed by the number of students affected by Mr. De’s love and compassion. More than six hundred students attended the ceremony including students who had already graduated. At that moment, the meaning of teaching became clear to me. As a teacher, I am inspired by Mr. De and the relationships he built with students. I strive each day to develop meaningful relationships by supporting learning and building self-esteem for students from all cultures and backgrounds. Though I have big shoes to fill, I try to teach the way Mr. De did, by reaching students through their hearts as well as their minds.

fortunate enough to have positive role models who supported my dreams and taught me that with hard work I could accomplish my goals. Everyone needs someone in their corner reminding them

that “dreams are the beginning to accomplishments,” and I want to be that person for my students.

When one of my students tells me “I can’t do it,” or “I am not any good at math,” I know this is one of the most important lessons I am going to teach. I let them know as a teacher that I am going to work hard for them, and they are going to work hard as the learner, but we can accomplish our goals.

### **Instilling Passion and Inspiration**

**Enrique A. Rey ♦ McFee Elementary School  
Grade 2 ♦ Bilingual (Math/Science)**

As a child, I had a teacher who inspired me tremendously. I was eager to attend her class. Yet most importantly, I wanted to build pretzel log cabins that resembled Lincoln’s home. Her stories about perseverance inspired me as she read with great passion. I felt ecstatic as I memorized the lines for the role I had in the *Wizard of Oz!* I loved her stories and her level of commitment. She taught me about the importance of taking pride in my work. She explained that doing the minimum wasn’t enough and advised me how such traits would help me in life! She taught lessons and inspired me to be the best. Her inspiration has remained throughout my schooling and teaching profession. I know that every child has the potential to learn

### **Be All That You Can Be!**

**Bridget Smith ♦ Metcalf Elementary School  
Grade 5 ♦ English Language Arts**

When I was 18 years old, a favorite teacher of mine wrote in my yearbook, “Be all that you can be!” I thought it was because he was in the Army and he wanted me to go into the Army. At the time, I had no idea what I wanted to be. So two years later, I joined the Air Force. After 20 years and 25

When students start to understand that we both have a part to do, they begin to believe it is possible. I love watching the intrinsic value they begin to feel with each success they experience. The subject I teach is math, but I know as a teacher we are all learning much more than that. We are all learning how to accomplish our dreams. The greatest accomplishments come from mastering what is difficult for us.

when given the appropriate tools. Each day, I focus on inspiring children to succeed. I consistently instill a passion for learning, a desire to succeed academically and socially. I connect with children when I share the story of how my parents worked hard to come to this country to provide me with a variety of opportunities. They wanted me to seek personal growth and development with a focus on a world-class education. As an educator, I feel in my heart that I fulfill the purpose of serving as a positive role model for my students. It is my nature to provide children with immediate feedback and positive reinforcement. I also ensure that students feel appreciated, safe, and successful.

days in the Air Force, I still did not know what I wanted to be. That is when I realized that all my favorite teachers or my role models were veterans. Even my college professors who were my favorite were also veterans.

The military taught me that “home is where you hang your hat,” and it is up to you to make the best out of any situation. This is the outlook that I give my students and co-workers. The military taught me that what you do outside reflects the inside. If I treat my school as the best school in Cy Fair, then

## **My Inspiration**

**Julie Tally ♦ Millsap Elementary School  
Grade 5 ♦ Math**

As I think back to which teachers inspired me to do what I love, two come to mind, my parents. I am the teacher I am today because of them. They instilled in me a love for education, hard work, perseverance, dedication, and the ability to build relationships.

I grew up in Angleton, Texas as the youngest of six children. I lived across the street from Southside Elementary. Every year, my sister and I would help the teachers prepare their classrooms in August and clean out their classrooms in May. As a thank you, the teachers would always give us materials we could use to play teacher. My favorite students were my mom and my stuffed animals.

My mom was the backbone of our family. My dad worked 2 to 3 jobs so she could stay home with us. She provided love, guidance, support, and believed I could succeed in whatever I wanted to do. By

## **From One Great Teacher to Another**

**Leonila Mendoza ♦ Owens Elementary School  
Grade 1 ♦ Bilingual**

Since my arrival in the USA, I have had the privilege of meeting many inspirational teachers, both when I was a student and later when I became a teacher. One individual who stands out is Leo Ramirez, Sr. who I met during my sophomore year in high school. Mr. Ramirez was my pre-

everyone will see my school as the best. If I treat my students as the best in Cy Fair, they will be the best. I want to empower my students to be the best that they can be. I want to emulate for my students what was instilled in me by my greatest role model, a teacher!

emulating my mom’s character, I easily build relationships with my students. I truly believe that my students learn because I believe in them and their ability to succeed. By creating positive and honest relationships with my students, they buy into the Quantum Learning and whole brain teaching that I use in my classroom.

I am very blessed to have had parents who nourished my love for education. Thank you, Dad, for supporting me. To my Mom who’s looking down from Heaven, I love you for helping me become who I am today. My husband Dan, you are my best supporter and encourager! I couldn’t do this without you! To my children Parker, Payton, and Paige, I hope that I have instilled in you the love of learning that my parents gave to me. To my in laws Molly and Craig, thank you for being there for my family so I can do what I love.

calculus teacher and the coach of the Math Wizards. Mr. Ramirez inspired me to become a dedicated, responsible student because of the great love and dedication he expressed when he taught. Mr. Ramirez was always willing to reteach and teach at the moment if a student would not understand.

He always showed respect for his students. He was always kind, patient, and willing to listen. Later, in 1994, I learned that Mr. Ramirez had been chosen as the Texas State Secondary teacher of the year. It was at that moment that I realized how blessed I was to have been taught by such an amazing teacher. My life had been touched by the best of the best. I was inspired to strive for similar acknowledgement and to make a

## **Without You, Who Would I BE?**

**Yolanda L. Borrego ♦ Post Elementary School  
Grade 5 ♦ Language Arts ♦ READ 180 ♦ SEI**

Growing up I always thought I would be an accountant or a CPA, not a teacher. After 22 years, I believe this was my calling. I have been blessed in my personal life and in my career to have been surrounded with such strong, outstanding role models to mirror myself after.

At an early age my parents instilled in us the belief that education was the doorway to opportunities. Success came when coupled with hard work and persistence. My father growing up lacked the opportunity to receive an education and my mother received her G.E.D. many years after dropping out of school in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade because of economic reasons. Yet both were determined to provide us with the greatest opportunity in life that they were not, a good education. I believed I was capable of anything and was never allowed to settle for second best. Their determination and yearning for something greater in life is what drove me to continue my education. After several years of being a full-time mom, I ultimately landed a career in teaching. I

positive impact on each child’s education in the same way that Mr. Ramirez had impacted me. My memories of Mr. Ramirez bring to mind a quote by Carl Jung, “One looks back with appreciation to the brilliant teachers, but with gratitude to those who touched our human feelings. The curriculum is so much necessary raw material, but warmth is the vital element for the growing plant and for the soul of the child.”

can say proudly that I am who I am today because of them and can attribute most of my successes not only as an educator but as a person to values they embedded in me.

My understanding husband showed love and support when I’d work late nights to make sure reports, lesson plans, or my classroom were all in order for the following week. My beautiful and amazing children taught me patience and understanding in their own unique ways of learning. This has enabled me to understand that, in order to reach every student, I must be adaptable to their own style of learning. My administrator Missy Kilday motivates and encourages me to step out of my comfort zone each day making me a more polished teacher. My incredible and supportive team with different personalities share a common goal, student success. But most importantly, all the students have allowed me to empower them with knowledge and respect, and give me the opportunity to learn from them how to be a better educator and person.

## **My decision to become a teacher**

**Kristi Huntley ♦ Tipps Elementary School  
Grade 1 ♦ Self-Contained**

When thinking of a profession, I always told myself that I would “never be a teacher.” However, once I had my own children, this thought began to change ever so slowly. When my daughter and son were students in elementary school, I began to notice how their learning was influenced in large part by their teachers. This small truth began to pique my interest in teaching. I started to substitute teach to see if this was something that I wanted to do. It seemed natural to me, but having a background in the business world, I was unsure which path to follow. Then, my son’s second grade teacher sent home her “All About Me” letter in which she explained her own pathway

from corporate America to the classroom. At that point, my idea about teaching was validated and I knew that this was something that I COULD DO! Her letter inspired me to move forward to become a teacher. Each day, I work hard to do whatever it takes to influence my students in a positive way. We accomplish learning through song, movement, and playing games or whatever allows us to learn while having fun. There have been times when my students have told me that they don’t want to go home because they were having so much fun at school. To me, this is what my job is all about and why I love what I do.

## **A Blessing in Disguise**

**Percy L. Gilliam, Jr. ♦ Truitt Middle School  
Grades 7 and 8 ♦ READ 180**

You can find me at Truitt Middle School wearing a shirt, a tie, and a smile. Inside the classroom, I try to divulge as much wisdom as possible. Teaching reading has been a blessing in disguise. Through the reading selections, I am able to sneak in countless life lessons where I teach students how to make wise choices and accept consequences for their actions. This is especially important for me because over the years as an educator, I have been repeatedly placed in the position to work with some of the most challenging students in the school. Whether it’s in my class, in extracurricular activities, or through a mentorship, some kind of way they are attracted to me like metal to a magnet. My life experiences have enabled me to easily connect to all students, help them see beyond their present condition, and allow them to see that there

is light at the end of a tunnel in which they only saw darkness.

For me my mother was my “Spotlight Teacher.” One year in particular, I remember asking Santa for a BMX dirt bike as one of my gifts for Christmas. Instead, I received a globe from my mom of which I didn’t understand the significance. All I saw was a globe. However, she explained that “the world” was mine to conquer, and I can do anything I put my mind to! Although my mother is no longer with me, the seed that she planted in my life still continues to grow and flourish. This is why I continue to plant seeds of knowledge, empowerment, and love into my students.

In closing, I would say to parents and teachers that they should continue planting seeds and teaching life to your children.

Who knows, they may be a Spotlight Teacher someday.

## **My Role Model**

**Christine E. Clark ♦ Walker Elementary School  
Grade 4 ♦ Math ♦ Science**

As an educator, I do my best to focus on being a positive role model for my students. I feel that it is very important for children to have someone to look up to and model after whether it is a family member or someone outside of the home. My role model was my mother. She always instilled in me that I should be the best that I can be in whatever I do and never accept the word “can’t.” She told me that I could accomplish whatever I put my mind to if I just try.

There have been many times in my life that I have been told that I couldn’t do

something, but I always remembered what my role model told me. This always encouraged me to try even harder. Every child should be given the chance to do something before giving up on it. When my students tell me that they are not good in math or science, I set out to prove them wrong. My job is to help them feel like they can accomplish anything they set their minds to. I want to make them believe they can be good in math and science, and I make it my mission to give them a chance to be good at it.

## **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.*

## **Still Learning**

**Janice Mims ♦ Adaptive Behavior Center  
Grade 8 ♦ Math**

Betty Barnes Cenales, my mother, inspired me to be a lifelong learner by learning as a professional, learning to resolve issues, and learning to meet the individual needs of students. My mother was a phenomenal educator who passionately gave her all to students throughout her career. Watching her plan lessons, create activities, and increase student achievement was my first experience with learning. It’s because of my mother’s dedication to the field of education that I am inspired to spend my life helping students.

Lifelong learning is learning to know, learning to do, learning to live, and learning to be. It’s learning that is flexible, diverse,

and available at different times and in different places. My mom inspired me to never stop learning to be resilient, sensitive, compassionate, and growing competent in the areas I would facilitate daily in the classroom.

My mom passed away a few years ago. As life would have it, she passed away in her classroom learning and preparing for her students. Indeed, she proved to the world the true meaning of a lifelong learner. She lived it and died doing it. Indeed, my desire is to forever learn to be the best educator possible and to change lives while touching hearts.

It's an honor to be selected as teacher of the year, but it's more of a demonstration of lifelong learning since my mother was also

granted the same award during her tenure as an educator. I learned as a child. I'm learning now. I plan to learn for a lifetime.

**There is Always Room to Grow**  
**Meghan Kolenda ♦ Bang Elementary School**  
**Grade 4 ♦ Writing ♦ Science**

My first year as a teacher, I was lucky enough to have an amazing partner. She took me under her wing and guided me through all the firsts. Her passion for our students was contagious. She was always reflecting upon her teaching whether it was brainstorming ways for us to reach a student or creating an engaging lesson. Her quest to learn and grow never ended. These first experiences molded me into the teacher I am today.

As a teacher, you are a lifelong learner. I learn every day from my colleagues, students, and my own mistakes and successes. This is what makes teaching so

rewarding; there is always room to grow. A valuable life lesson that I teach my students is that I am also a student, and they are my teachers. I reflect on their lessons daily and set goals for myself to improve as a teacher.

As I walk the halls of Bang, I see dedicated teachers, administrators, and paraprofessionals who want nothing but success, no matter how big or small, for our students. I consider myself lucky to work beside each of them, making a difference in the lives of children.

*Who dares to teach must never cease to learn. – John Cotton Dan*

**Unquenchable Thirst For Knowledge**  
**Njeri Richardson-Carty ♦ Frazier Elementary School**  
**Grade 4 ♦ Reading ♦ Language Arts ♦ Social Studies**

***“Commit yourself to lifelong learning. The most valuable asset you’ll ever have is your mind and what you put into it.”***

*Brian Tracy*

I believe teaching requires ambition which is beginning with the end in mind, using one's resources, taking action in prioritizing and dedicating one's self to the commitment of teaching students. This commitment is what fuels me to continuously seek opportunities to grow and learn the best practices to master my craft. My career started with a double major in elementary and special education, but I thirsted for more and attained a Masters in Educational Studies and a Masters in Educational Administration among other

certifications and specialties in order to meet the varied needs of children.

I see my purpose as one who creates a lifestyle of being a lifelong role model and leader to my students, colleagues, and community. I consider myself a student as well as a teacher always learning through experiences and continually refining methods. It is crucial that teachers recognize the power inherent in their role and are self-reflective about their actions and practice. Our legacy, our focus, and our commitment must be maintained and dynamic enough to meet the needs of an exponentially changing landscape of students' future.

***“We now accept the fact that learning is a lifelong process of keeping abreast of change. And the***

***most pressing task is to teach people how to learn.” -***

*Peter Drucker*

**Bloom Where You Are Planted**  
**Amber Cook ♦ Gleason Elementary School**  
**Grade 4 ♦ Mathematics ♦ Science ♦ Science Liaison**

I am humbled and honored to have been chosen as the Gleason Elementary Spotlight Teacher for 2013. I can proudly say I have learned from and been inspired by some of the best! My seeds were planted here. As a Cy Fair ISD student growing up, my roots run deep from Lowery to Holmsley, from Watkins to Labay, and then on to Langham Creek. I remember so many teachers I had throughout the years that touched my life and helped me grow. They built and maintained relationships with their students that have influenced my way of teaching today.

My first full year was in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade at Gleason. I worked along-side some amazing women who mentored me, observed me, guided me, taught me. Although my colleagues inspire me, I must say, my students are the ones that help me blossom the most! Their innocence, curiosity, and

eagerness to learn is awe inspiring to me. I want to learn more with them, do more with them, and make their learning environment even more engaging!

As I moved to 4<sup>th</sup> grade my inspiration grew. I took on the role of co-leader of our newly implemented PBIS program. I was fortunate enough to gain more experience with classroom management and BBR. As I passed the torch of PBIS, I have taken on the science liaison role. This role has provided new opportunities to get to know some awesome science teachers throughout the district, and I have more access and exposure to the amazing world of science! I love sharing this with my students!

Needless to say, I am appreciative of my role as a teacher. I plan to be a life-long learner, not only for myself, but for my beautifully blooming students!.

**Learning In Order to Grow**  
**Sabrina Thomas ♦ Reed Elementary School**  
**Grade 1 ♦ ESL**

Prior to my first year as a teacher, I spent three years as an in-class support paraprofessional in Cy Fair. During that time, I observed many effective and ineffective instructional strategies, behavior management system, organizational structures, and teaching styles. I was convinced that my experience combined with my college education would equal a first year of minimal stress. However, I quickly learned that my journey was just beginning.

My first semester as a teacher was one of many tears, early mornings, and late nights. Despite my efforts to implement all the great strategies and procedures I had observed as a paraprofessional and learned in college, I was failing. I was leaving school crying almost every day feeling like a failure with decreasing faith in my ability to teach my students and manage a classroom. Then one evening, amidst my crying, I realized I could either sink or swim. It was up to me. Pride aside, the next day I went to work and asked

my colleagues for help. That decision has made all the difference in my growth as a person and an educator.

I now understand that growth requires committing to being a life-long learner. For me this means, seeking help when I need it, being willing to make mistakes and learn

## “Awakening joy in creative expression and knowledge”

**Edith Patel ♦ M. Robinson Elementary School  
Kindergarten ♦ OWDL SEI**

What I love is teaching, my family, dance, and learning. Each day I strive to create a classroom environment that encompasses all of these aspects. During writing time, I write small moment stories about a real moment in my life. This is how my students learn about me and my family, and through their writing, I also learn about them and their families. I incorporate music, dance, and movement into my teaching. In my classroom, we are always up and moving. This allows me to reach the various types of learners in the class. I not only like to teach, but I also enjoy learning. I feel very lucky that our district provides such a large

from them, listening to constructive criticism, collaborating with my colleagues, and taking advantage of professional development opportunities. In doing so, I continue to grow into an educator who delivers purposeful and effective instruction that meets the needs of my students.

number of professional development opportunities. I use what I learn in our professional development courses by first adding my own “seasoning” to it, and then I apply it to my teaching. I enjoy being creative with my lessons and also in how I teach my students. One of my students this year said, “I have so much fun at school every day. I love singing and dancing in your class!” I am very fortunate to do what I love every day. I look forward to my job every morning!

*“It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge.” – Albert Einstein*

## Why I Teach

**Soledad Albarran ♦ Sheridan Elementary School  
Grade 5 ♦ READ 180**

The early years of my life were not something to be proud of. I was a high school dropout and a teenage mother. When my son entered kindergarten, I woke up from my ignorance and decided to do something about it.

My troubles began when I was in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and my father decided to send the family to Mexico in order to make ends meet. Because of the language barrier, they placed me in 1<sup>st</sup> grade. Upon completing 3<sup>rd</sup> grade in Mexico, we moved back to Chicago to continue my education. Because of my

age, they placed me in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, not taking into consideration that I was missing fundamental lessons necessary for my success. Although the teachers did their best, the gap was quite wide and unmanageable ultimately resulting in yet another high school dropout.

It wasn't until my son entered kindergarten that I realized how unfulfilled my life was. Upon reflecting on the causes of my failure, I decided to return to school, get a GED, and go to college. I chose to become a bilingual teacher in order to help children

who might find themselves struggling to close the academic gap as I did. This is the

reason I teach.

## Many Things Have Changed Kathryn Price ♦ Swenke Elementary School Grade 4 ♦ Math ♦ Science

Twenty-five years ago, I entered my first classroom and embraced teaching as an opportunity to inspire and empower all children. Over the years, many things have changed, but one thing that remains is the goal for all my students to feel loved, challenged, and secure in knowing that I believe in them. I strive daily to inspire them, capture their hearts, and give them security in taking risks. As a teacher, I believe that I have a greater responsibility to my students than merely ensuring compliance and basic understanding of the curriculum.

My hope as a teacher is to give my students the gift of knowledge. It is a gift that cannot be taken away. With diligence, I work to create a classroom where all students are comfortable and accepting of themselves. I strive for my students to flourish in a positive environment that produces life-long learners who are creative and independent.

Another hope is to have my students learn to think for themselves and view the world as a beautiful place to live. I want them to realize they can leave the world a little better place by continuing to develop their minds and cultivate their potential as they grow. Leading students into development of critical self-awareness on their own is important to me, and I believe all students want to know and understand the “why” of the information we give them.

Finally, I embrace teaching as an opportunity to give students meaningful classroom experiences daily. I want my students to simply see the connections between the knowledge they are gaining and the realization of where this knowledge will take them in life. Many things have changed, but I still love the opportunity to build relationships, and I love my job!

## Mr. Welch

**Luke Nelson ♦ Willbern Elementary School  
Grade 5 ♦ ELAR ♦ SS**

Sometimes you are blessed to know someone who makes you stop and think, “If everybody in the world was like this person, the world would be a much better place, the world would have very few problems.” Mr. Welch was such a person. He was my high school English teacher, but more importantly, he was the most impactful teacher I have ever had. Mr. Welch was inspiring but his inspiration was subtle. He was soft spoken but was still able to

command a classroom. His impact did not come from what or how he taught, but instead, it came from him. He himself was a lover of knowledge, and thinking, and questioning the world around him. He was a lifelong learner and as such couldn't help but be an extraordinary role model. He saw people in his classroom, not students, and took a vested interest in all of them. He was as equally intrigued with a story told by a freshman about their weekend as he was

about the three chapters of Great Expectations that we would discuss that day in class. The list of his attributes is endless and this is the reason I never have to hesitate when someone asks, “Who is the most inspiring teacher you have ever had?”

### **Lessons from Opera!**

**Russel L. Mahon ♦ Wilson Elementary School  
Grades K through 5 ♦ Music**

Children and adults tend to have very definite opinions about music. As a music teacher, one of my favorite lessons reminds my students (and me) about the importance of keeping an open mind in music and in life. This lesson does not start out as the students’ favorite, but by the time we finish, they love it.

Many are not convinced when I introduce the lesson by telling them, “Today we will be listening to opera, and you will ask me to play it again when it is over.” However, as I begin to tell the story and set the scene in their minds, they start to show an interest. By the time we listen to the

### **Changed for good**

**Carolina Mejias ♦ Yeager Elementary  
Grade 4 ♦ READ 180**

These past eight years in education have taught me more about life, people, and love than I could have ever imagined. They have changed me for the better. I taught one short year in Miami where I learned that teachers can not only be educators, they must also be parents, counselors, and role models. That was a very a difficult year teaching Haitian-American students from the projects. It was filled with trials and challenges that made me question my decision to become a teacher. However, with perseverance and a lot of tears, I taught them reading, writing, math, and science skills. I will never forget

I try to emulate Mr. Welch in my own classroom, always keeping in mind that our goal as teachers is to educate and mold not great test takers but good and well-rounded people.

music, they are completely engaged and when it’s finished the reaction is always the same. “Let’s do it again!” The excitement and smiles on their faces tell it all – they really enjoyed it! The students just had that “Aha!” moment. They realize, just maybe, that what they thought about opera wasn’t completely true.

Bringing music and the arts alive is so much fun. This lesson has also taught me to stop and think, “What preconceived ideas or thoughts have I made about my students that might not be right?” I teach them to open their minds to the arts and they teach me to open my mind to them.

those students because they truly made a handprint on my heart, and they will forever guide my daily teaching.

In Cypress-Fairbanks ISD, I have had the pleasure to teach at-risk, bilingual, and ESL populations which have truly made an impression on my soul. Through the years, I have learned that these students need routines, procedures, and relevant curriculum. But most importantly, they need love, respect, and a sense of belonging. If students know you actually love them and care for them, they will respond in a similar way. Some students need a boost of

confidence, a hug, or just a wink to let them know that you understand. My students have taught me patience, respect, and countless life lessons. They have also helped me recognize that this profession is not a job

or a career, it is a calling and a vocation, and because of them I feel that I have been *changed for good* and hope that I have done the same for them.

## **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 analyzing all pertinent data, listening to and valuing others’ viewpoints, and actively seeking consensus.*

### **A Passionate Love For All**

**Haley Conrad ♦ Bane Elementary School  
Grades K through 5 ♦ Resource Reading ♦ Language Arts**

*“A teacher takes a hand, opens a mind, touches a heart, shapes the future.”*  
-Unknown

Teaching students with disabilities has always been a true passion of mine. When I was in college, I connected with an organization that helped mentor young adults with severe disabilities. This is where I met a girl with autism that ended up touching my life forever. She was someone that, despite all the obstacles and hardships that came her way had so much joy in her heart and loved life and lived every moment to its fullest. I was so intrigued by her positive outlook on everything in her life that I knew that I wanted to instill that same positive spirit in students.

In the precious world of special education, I have the pleasure to work with amazing kids every day. Although I only see these students for a short amount of time each day, they still have a way of touching my heart and inspiring me in ways that no one else can. In my classroom, learning does not always come easy for my students. I make sure that they receive an infinite amount of love, a supportive environment to learn and grow, and to be that person that has faith and believes in them. Building strong relationships with my students allows them to open up to new ways of learning and turn the “I can’t,” into “I CAN!” Being able to watch these students grow and celebrate every step of progress, small or big, is so rewarding as a teacher.

### **“All the World’s a Stage....”**

**Timothy Estelle ♦ Cypress Woods High School  
Grades 9 through 12 ♦ Theatre Arts**

Acclaimed author, lecturer, and educational / business motivator Sir Ken Robinson states in his book, *The Element*, that “If you’re not prepared to be wrong, you’ll never come up with anything original.”

This statement holds particular relevance to me because I firmly believe that as an educator and artist, we place value on the practice of discovery which ultimately is cultivated from curiosity. Nine years ago,

my curiosity for the way students took to the performing arts was fostered through an educational outreach program sponsored by a professional theatre company in Tucson, Arizona. Nearing the end of my first year in “the real world,” the opportunity presented itself to serve as an administrative intern in the education department. Looking for a change of pace from serving coffee to regional theatre directors, I agreed to join a focus group of high school students for a production of William Shakespeare’s, *Macbeth*. Little did I know that this

opportunity would form the foundation for what I now know represents a life-long mission to discover how the arts can impact learning and overall student success in education. I was not prepared for the experience I had that evening with the student focus group, but I firmly believe that I was meant to be there. From that experience, I made a very personal, creative, and original choice to move in the direction of arts education, and because of that, I have been privileged to be in my ‘element’ ever since.

teaching did NOT follow me into my classroom today!

Luckily for me, the past nine years have been filled with role models that have blessed me beyond measure. They have modeled how to play one of the most important roles I can think of, a school teacher. My peers have done many things; they’ve mentored me, led by example, shared ideas with me, supported me in my areas of weakness, and they’ve made me look good through their support and actions. The amazing teachers and staff that I teach

with every day are not only tremendous examples of educators, but incredible people with beautiful hearts. I’m honored to call many of them friends.

For me, teaching has always been about the inspiration I get from those that have touched my heart through the years, from administrators, teachers, and staff members; to parents that have encouraged me along the way, to the many special, precious children I’ve had the privilege of teaching. I am truly “living the dream!”

### **Daily Inspiration**

**Casey Morris ♦ Farney Elementary School  
Kindergarten ♦ All Subjects**

I am inspired daily by the teachers I work with. I graduated from Texas A&M with a degree in marketing. It wasn’t until my senior year of college that I realized I wanted to become a teacher. So, after a few years in the business world, I left my job and began to obtain my teaching certificate through an alternative certification program. After a year of substitute teaching, I was hired to teach kindergarten at Farney Elementary. Since then, I have always been surrounded by incredible people. I had a wonderful mentor my first year who took me under her wing and showed me the ins and outs of teaching. I was never a student teacher, so you can imagine how many new things I had to learn. My kindergarten team

has always been close even though it has not always been the same group of teachers. We are always there for each other and represent the true meaning of a team. I am so blessed to be surrounded daily by such amazing people. They inspire me to balance work and family, think outside the box, be prepared and willing to help others, persevere when faced with tragedy, and teach children compassion and understanding. I have always had support and encouragement from my administration and have been honored to work for two amazing principals. Being able to work in such a wonderful environment and do what I love is a blessing, and that is truly inspiring.

### **“There is No I in TEAM!”**

**Cheryl Malone ♦ Rennell Elementary School  
Grade 1 ♦ All Subjects**

A team player is one who cooperates with others for the group’s benefit, striving to solve problems by analyzing all pertinent data, listening to and valuing others’ viewpoints, and actively seeking consensus. I am just one of seven on this valuable first grade team, without them I don’t feel I would have been given the honor of “Rennell Elementary 2013 Spotlight Teacher.” We are a team that demonstrates reliability, communicates constructively, listens actively, functions as an active participant, shares openly and willingly, cooperates and pitches in to help, exhibits flexibility, shows commitment to the team, works as a problem solver, and treats others in a respectful and supportive manner. We all want our students to be successful and not just in our classes. We also work with each other’s students and bring our classes together so that they also know that we are a

team and that any of us can help them at any given time. We are unique. Each of us brings something to this team.

Thank you to the best team ever for helping me to be a contributing team member. Special thanks to Cindy Bryant, “Team Organizer,” Samantha Burr, “Our Young and Wise Inspiration,” Coleen Dupre, “Amazing Writing Coach,” Jeannine Gabriel, “Creative Mind,” Kyndra Hartzler, “My Idol,” and Lindsey Nelius, “Outstanding Resource Volunteer.” There is no “I” in the word TEAM. This has been a philosophy of mine throughout my life. The TEAM can only make the individual stronger. I not only have grown as a person but professionally as a team player. To represent my school Rennell Elementary as their 2013 Spotlight Teacher is one of the greatest honors I can hold as a teacher.

### **Living the Dream**

**Amy Burrer ♦ Keith Elementary School  
Kindergarten ♦ All Subjects**

Teaching is a second career for me. Early on I was fortunate to enjoy a career in corporate relocation, but teaching had been my dream from an early age. My grandmother used to enjoy telling the story

about how I would use the neighbor kid as my “student.” I would stand at my little chalkboard and stomp around telling him what to do, yelling at him to pay attention. Thank goodness that “early start” in

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