

November Teacher of the Month: Jennifer Wilhelm

Written by Chrissy Largo Sun Correspondent
Friday, 13 November 2015 01:42



Jennifer Wilhelm, a fifth grade teacher at Jefferson Elementary School, never knew she would become a teacher. She began her career as a journalism student in high school and in college she was a history major. Her career after college quickly took a different turn as she embarked in a career in business banking for 10 years.

Years later she had a daughter and took some time off. When she decided to go back to work she wanted to do something different so she became a preschool teacher. She realized that she loved teaching and made teaching kids her main passion.

Find out why teaching fifth grade to her is perfect.

Sun: How did you get started as a teacher?

Wilhelm: I was actually working at Gallup High School in the counseling office as a secretary and the assistant principal. At the time, Kim Orr, hounded me for an entire year before I would finally go back to school.

So, I got my educators degree in elementary education.

Before that I was originally a history major in college, and that was right out of high school. I left college and I spent ten years in business banking. I did high-end business loans and construction loans.

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We got pregnant with my youngest daughter and we decided that I didn't want to be working at that time, so I quit and I stayed home. When I was ready to go back to work, I wanted to work somewhere else, so I started teaching at a private Christian preschool. And that is when I realized that I enjoyed teaching and that was nine years ago.

Sun: How long have you been a teacher at Jefferson Elementary?

Wilhelm: This has been my third year here teaching. I started out with second grade and then I moved to third grade in the middle of last year, and the principal put me up to fifth grade. And I love it. Fifth grade is the best and I will stay here forever.

Sun: How is it like being a teacher in such a diverse environment such as Gallup?

Wilhelm: My dad was in the military, so I was born in Germany, I grew up in Texas, went to high school and college in Arizona. I guess growing up in the military, I grew up with such diverse friends and in such diverse cultures.

My husband, however, was born and raised, fifth generation Gallupian, and he was part of the founding families. I really like it because the kids bring so much to it, you know, some of them are city kids. My daughter, we live in a ranch, that is what my husband does, my husband is a rancher, and so she brings the country aspect.

We have some kids that have just moved here, and some that have been here for generations. We have some kids whose parents went to school with teachers. I've got kids that are Hispanic and I got kids that are Native American. I've got kids that are of mixed ethnicities. There really is a sense of community amongst our kids and I really like that. I think that if you had kids that were all the same, I think you almost lose that.

Sun: What kind of impact do you think your role, as a leadership role, has on your students?

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Wilhelm: I think more than I could ever probably realize the impact that I have. I am always honest with them. I tell them that this isn't going to be this easy and tell them this is something that you are going to use in this class but when you leave out that door, you may never use it again, but you got to know it!

But, just as honest as saying, this is something you will have to have for the rest of your life. This is something that you are going to have to know to be able to be a parent, an employee, a successful person in life. I never thought as myself as a leader. I am their teacher. I am teaching them, and giving them, hopefully what they need and I hope it is enough. It is like being a parent. I mean, I worry about them on the weekends, birthdays, and how they are doing.

When I have them and they come to this classroom, they are as much as mine as my own is, so I hope that I give them what they need not only for here but for life.

Sun: How do you feel that elementary education has changed up until now versus 10, 20, or 30 years ago?

Wilhelm: I can tell you right now, what I am teaching, in math, in fifth grade is what I learned in eighth grade. It is three years ahead of where it was, 10-15 years ago. The students are expected to know just as much at a younger age, and so, you have to really encourage them and let them know they can do it. Then, giving them the tools, the skills, and the confidence to do it.

I have three posters up. One says, "Mistakes are just proof that you are trying." I always told them, if the world was perfect, there would be no erasers. I always tell them, "I'm not telling you it is going to be easy, I'm telling you that it is going to be worth it," I try to use examples of real life people. I use the example of Albert Einstein and Thomas Edison a lot. They were both told in school that they weren't intelligent enough, they weren't worth the time, they couldn't do it, and they would never be successful. And look at where they ended up. A lot of my kids realize that just because they are struggling does not mean that they cannot succeed.

Sun: Do you have any goals as a teacher right now that you would like to share with us?

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Wilhelm: To me, I will be a success this year if they walk out that door and they love to read. They read because they love it and not because someone told them they have to, or if it is required for class. Also, if they can be successful in life. I mean to me, not all my kids will not go on to college. Sadly, a lot of them will not graduate high school. It is the fact in our community. Do I want them to? Oh yes! Are they all capable of it? You better believe it! I will be on their tail if I ever find out that they are think about dropping out. But it is a reality we face, but I want them to be successful in life and to understand that you can be successful in life, even if you don't go to college.

Sun: Besides teaching, what do you do in your spare time?

Wilhelm: We hunt, we fish, and we camp. I don't do as much free time as I would like, because you take everything home with you. A teacher's free time is planning for the next lesson. But, I just like spending time with my family. Our family has a ranch, so, I help out my husband. Our daughters do too ...we are free labor. I give them a hard time about it.

Sun: Who do you look up to as a teacher?

Wilhelm: I would not be here, where I am at today, if it hadn't been for Kim Orr. Dr. Kim Orr. She is the principal at the Gallup High School. I absolutely would not be here. She truly believed in me and my possibilities as a teacher when I didn't even know they were there.

Sun: One of your students wrote, "Mrs. Wilhelm has helped me to be a straight-A student and has taught me what discipline and respect is." How do you feel about this?

Wilhelm: I was so blown away first away that one of my students thought that much about me. Then really reading that, makes me realize, the little things that you do, and you don't think about, you are not conscientiously doing it, those are the things that they pick up on. It was very humbling, that here he is, eleven years old and that is his take away.

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Sun: Describe your students in one word.

Wilhelm: Enthusiastic. They are enthusiastic in anything that they do. They really do pour everything into whether it is projects, or games we play, or work we do, they jump in with both feet and sometimes it is just the physical. They are bouncing-off-the-walls-enthusiastic.

Sun: Is there any advice that you would like to give to your students?

Wilhelm: Never give up. Never.

For Jessica Landavazo-Guillen, first year principal of Jefferson Elementary School, had many positive things to say about Mrs. Wilhelm, saying that she is heavily involved in the school's activities: "She is an amazing teacher. She gets her student's excited about learning and you can see that with every student in her class. She is willing to help out in the school in any area that needs it. She's helped do professional development with staff. She's our spelling bee chairman this year. She's willing to help not to just better her class but better the school."

Camille's Sidewalk Café continues to award a candidate each month for the 2015-2016 school year. To nominate your teacher, fill out an entry form at Camille's Sidewalk Café, 306 S. Second St. in Gallup.