

Hozho Academy teacher turns challenges into assets

Written by By Cody Begaye Sun Correspondent
Friday, 13 November 2020 08:06



Meet Camille's Teacher of the Month: Nancy Foster

Each month, Camille's Sidewalk Cafe recognizes one local teacher within the Gallup area for his or her determination to help students go above and beyond. Prospective teachers are nominated by students who feel they deserve to be recognized.

Nancy Foster, of Hozho Academy, spent time as an adult going through a number of jobs, but said it was meeting some inmates at a juvenile detention center that spurred her to want to help make a difference in the lives of children and thus led to her becoming a teacher.

BACKGROUND

Foster was born in Michigan, a self-described "General Motors brat," who then moved to Georgia when she was five and then to Oklahoma when she was 15. She is a mother of five daughters and grandmother to six.

The choices that led to her career path were clarified when she was an adult.

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"I found out when I was 40 [that] I have ADHD, so I never finished much of anything in my life," Foster said to the *Sun* Oct. 30. "I had to get a job, so I ended up working as a parole officer for juvenile delinquents.

"My job was to go to court and testify for the residents who were going to prison," Foster said. "They were all 14, 15 years old, and after a time I couldn't do it anymore."

THE CALL TO TEACH

Foster quit her job as a parole officer and drove a truck for a year, despite having no prior experience driving 18-wheelers. She called the experience "enlightening."

She then quit that job after being spurred to come home by her father, who also reminded her she had always wanted to be a teacher.

"I just want to get [help to] these kids, because at the facility where I worked, almost every kid had an Individualized Education Program," Foster said. "I thought if I can get into a school, I could make a difference in their lives.

"I actually had a pick of schools as a math teacher," Foster said. While she also taught special education, there was a greater demand for math teachers in Oklahoma.

After teaching a regular math class for a time, Foster married and ended up moving to Gallup in 2010. Foster began her new career teaching at Gallup Christian School since her husband is a pastor and also did fundraisers for Manuelito Children's Home.

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“I decided, these kids have a lot of support and I wanted to work with kids who didn’t have that support system,” she said.

As a result, she transitioned to Chief Manuelito Elementary School where she taught math and special ed full time. However, this decision soon led to a burnout.

“Most special ed teachers go to a classroom and someone else has prepped the class and you go and help the kids out,” Foster explained. “I was teaching class and doing IEPs [Individualized Education Plans], and it got to a point where I was overwhelmed and couldn’t do it anymore.”

MAKING MATH FUN

Foster then asked to be moved to Hozho Academy, where there was a need for a third grade teacher. She had previously taught first through fifth grade at a private school, so she went forward with her decision.

Given her burnout was caused by teaching both math and special ed, Hozho staff felt it best she focus on being a math teacher.

“I took the kids who struggled the most and I worked with them in math,” Foster said. “I did a math club after school where I work on fact fluencies using games. Everything I do is a game, almost.

“We do the work books, but I always try to tie those two together because math is fun. And if you don’t know math is fun, then you didn’t have a good math teacher,” she added. “Math is in everything you do.”

CHALLENGES INTO OPPORTUNITIES

Foster explained how a lot of math problems in the students' work books are word problems. While people who may have a condition that makes it difficult to read, such as dyslexia like her mother had, can work around the reading impediments, there is no getting around difficulties with math.

"If you don't understand math, what you have on a calculator isn't going to help you," Foster said. "I want my kids to be as independent as possible and be successful."

Another major challenge every teacher faced this year was a transition to distance learning amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I was very anxious about working online because of my ADHD," Foster said. "I try to keep [work and home] separate."

Despite an initial bump in learning software like Zoom, Foster was able to adapt through her home office and continue helping her students on an individual basis.

And while Foster admitted her ADHD led to some difficulties focusing and finishing tasks in the past, she thinks it has become a benefit to her because it has taught her to be flexible and adapt to new circumstances.

"Since I already have ADHD, I tell these kids there is nothing stopping them from learning," she said. "I want my kids to learn and understand: it's an asset, it's not a disability. It's something you can use because you're able to multitask."

By being able to focus on students with an IEP and use the skills she has obtained through

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living with ADHD, through remote teaching, Foster made this statement.

“I was terrified at first, but it has worked out wonderfully,” she said. “I’m serious: this is the best teaching year I’ve ever had. I still need more hours in the day to help more kids out.”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Foster said this is the second time she can recall being recognized as a teacher. Despite feeling she is not a particularly great teacher, she affirms she does it for her students.

“I truly love all my students as if they were my own, and I care for them that way,” she said.

Foster gave her thanks to Hozho Academy and Gallup-McKinley County Schools for hiring her and letting her fulfill the dream she had.

“I’m a very blessed person even now. The distancing makes it difficult, but I just hope people keep looking for the good in things,” she said. “You can choose to be happy or miserable, and I choose to be happy.”

Interested in nominating your favorite teacher for Teacher of the Month?

Contact Camille’s Sidewalk Cafe at (505)722-5017 or stop by 306 S. Second St. in Gallup.

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