

‘Teacher of the Month’ Duane Yazzie: Determined to help the struggling student succeed

Written by By Chrissy Largo Sun Correspondent
Friday, 19 February 2016 03:50



Fifth grade teacher, Duane Yazzie, from Tsehootsooi Intermediate Learning Center took it upon himself to give a batch of 18 students the patience and learning they needed to enhance their learning capabilities in reading and writing.

The students are fifth graders that are considered “ELL”, which stands for English Language Learners, which means that they are not proficient in using English, and need help with improving their reading and writing skills.

“I knew it is going to be a challenge,” he said. “I’ve had those nights that seemed like it was sleepless. Wondering, how much are they going to progress in a given time period? They know with me that my expectations are still kind of high and I am not going to settle for anything less.”

Yazzie says his students may look like fifth graders, but they are actually reading at second and third grade level, and in some cases the first grade level. He even has some students that are non-readers.

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But, that didn’t stop him from taking up the challenge of giving these students a chance.

“Really it is for them,” he said. “It is not about me, in any way shape or form. I see how needy they are and how much they’re struggling and someone has to do it. Why not me?”

Being a product of this school district, he remembers a time when special area courses were being offered such as a year book class, choir class, home economics, and a horticulture class. Today, he says he is seeing less of those types of courses.

“Today, it is a textbook-driven curriculum,” he said.

Originally from the Fort Defiance area, he was raised by his grandparents and says that his maternal grandmother is his greatest role model.

“I think a lot of things I’ve espoused come from her,” he said. “She was hard worker. My grandfather was an alcoholic and she would walk and it didn’t matter if it was raining, snowing, she would walk from here to Window Rock and of course, she had me in tow. She was very very self-disciplined.”

He hopes that reminding his students that having self-discipline and self control is something that is needed for an individual person to succeed whether they get encouragement from their family and friends.

It was with that same dedication that seventh and eighth grade Principal of Tsehootsooi Middle School, David Moore, took notice and he recommended to Yazzie that his classroom partake in the Navajo-Hopi Astronomy Outreach Project, through the Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff.

The Navajo-Hopi Astronomy Outreach Project is an outreach program for Native American students. It’s designed to enhance their education in the astronomy field. A scientist visits their classroom to give monthly lessons that involve hands-on activities. At the end of the program,

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the students go on a field trip to the Lowell Observatory.

“He cares about kids so much and he is teaching them to be life learners,” he said. “Also, he is teaching them to be compassionate and tolerant, certain qualities that you do not see any more. He teaches them to care for other people, which for me are one of the greatest attributes.”

Yazzie also mentions that the school recently received a grant to supply iPads to use in the classrooms, something that he is thankful for.

“We are using a lot more of the iPads to aid our reading and our writing and to boost some achievements in those areas,” he said. “I hope that it resonates that we are building stronger leaders and writers.”

His passion is coaching volleyball in the district at the freshmen level; however, this year he decided to take the year off to focus on his students.

Last spring, he started a program called “Math Circles,” an after school tutoring program held every Tuesday, largely organized by Dine’ College. With a team of four teachers, including himself, they teach a group of fifth graders and sixth graders different strategies for learning math.

He also helped out this past summer, traveling to and from to a math camp, over a two-week period to the Dine’ College at the Tsailé location, to meet with other teachers that held PhDs in mathematics. Many came from the east coast to help teachers like Yazzie, to implement ways of teaching math besides the usual text book approach.

It was through this math camp, and his dedication that he was invited to a conference in Seattle to attend the “Joint Mathematics Meetings” this past December. Now, he is encouraged to take coursework in mathematics to get his math endorsement, which the program is willing to fund.

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And there's more.

Last year, his class took part in the “Walk On!” challenge, in which all the students were given a calendar and were challenged to eat five fruits or vegetables every day, two hours or less of screen time (usage of their tablets, watching movies, etc.), one hour of exercise and zero consumption of sweetened drinks, also known as the 5-2-1-0 goal.

“I thought, you know what, my students really showed me and proved to me that they were serious about meeting these challenges and these goals,” he said. “I told them ‘if you can prove to me that whole month, I will write the grant, on your behalf.’”

He submitted a proposal on behalf of his classroom to Blue Cross Blue Shield of Arizona to receive a \$5,000 grant to fund school programs that fight childhood obesity – and they won.

There were a total of 198 schools that participated, and it reached about 24,000 students.

As of Feb 1, Arizona Governor Doug Ducey declared this day officially as “Walk On! Day,” and on that same day in collaboration with the Dine’ Youth, Tsehootsooi Medical Center, and Department of Behavioral Health, the schools came together and had an array of fun physical activities planned for the students.

“It was a crazy Monday with the snow, but we still went ahead,” he said. “We had activities down in the middle school/intermediate gymnasium. We also used our field house across the street. It was icy. We had friends help stop traffic and go across.”

Meanwhile, Jennifer Kerr, director of restaurant support for Taira’s Inc., presented Yazzie with an array of gifts for him and his students, honoring him as this month’s “Teacher of the Month.”

“Seven different kids nominated you for “Teacher of the Month,” which has never happened before,” she said “It was really amazing. We just really wanted to let you know that we

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appreciate what you are doing here, working with the kids and it is really an honor."

Each month, Camille's Sidewalk Café, under the Taira's Inc. family of restaurants, selects a "Teacher of the Month." When the school year closes, look for the announcement of "Teacher of the Year" contest.

To nominate your teacher, fill out an entry form at Camille's Sidewalk Café, 306 S. Second St. in Gallup.

By Chrissy Largo

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