Written by By Kevin Opsahl Sun Correspondent
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Gallup High teacher prepares return to the classroom

Camille's Sidewalk Café selects a teacher every month to be recognized and celebrated from within the Gallup area. Nominees are selected based on votes from students and their families on how and why they feel their teacher deserves the award of "Teacher of the Month."

Joey Barreras (affectionately known by his students as Mr. B), who taught seniors at Gallup High School before temporarily retiring, is April's choice. Barreras spoke to the *Gallup Sun* about his journey as a teacher, retiring temporarily due to the pandemic and that he is ready to come back.

Barreras also said he would like to thank Debra Trujillo, an instructional coach at GHS. Trujillo is

supportive of his teaching and has pupils who were once Barreras' students.

TEACHING CAREER AND STYLE

A native of Gallup who attended GHS, Barreras boasts, "I don't think anybody in this town is more Bengal than me," referring to the school's mascot.

Barreras started there in 1998 and then taught in Las Cruces and Belen for several years before coming back to GHS. For the last ten years, he taught the Honors Research Program, a class he created for seniors to help them with life skills beyond high school. The curriculum includes college readiness, keeping up with personal finances, job interviewing skills and guest speakers from a variety of industries.

"Parents come see me asking if they can sit in on my class," Barreras said.

He knows he can't allow that, but Barreras tells his students, "Once you learn how to do it, show it to your parents or anyone who needs a job. It's not just benefiting you; it's benefiting them."

Since he got approval from the school board to teach it in his classroom, Barreras is hopeful all students in the Gallup-McKinley School District will be able to take the Honors Research Program.

Two of Barreras' students spoke highly of him as a teacher and person. In separate interviews with the *Sun*, McKenzie Lee and Ruth Wheeldon both called Barreras "a father figure."

"Especially in this community, where people don't always have that parental figure, he steps in as that figure," Wheeldon said.

Both students said the Honors Research Program prepared them for life after high school. Lee and Wheeldon said that Barreras' teaching was instrumental in getting them their first job or slot in college. While Wheeldon got an education assistant job at Hózhó Academy, Lee is set to join the pre-nursing program at University of New Mexico's Gallup campus.

"He has really helped me grow as a person and come out of my little box," Lee said.

Barreras showed Wheeldon that although it can be "scary" becoming an adult, a good support system of family and friends can always help.

"Eventually, (adulthood) does become kind of thrilling," she said.

When Lee was at Camille's Sidewalk Cafe recently, she decided to nominate Barreras for Teacher of the Month because "he should be appreciated and not be taken for granted."

Raegan Wheeldon, a former colleague of Barreras' who works at Hózhó Academy, said she is sad that her other daughter won't be able to get Barreras' nourishing teaching, as Ruth did.

"He's a long-term asset because he's having a life-long effect on the kids he works with," Raegan Wheeldon said. "As they grow and become adults, they're going to use the same skills he's teaching them now."

HEALTH SCARE/COVID-19

In 2019, Barreras, 50, suffered a mild heart attack while teaching and didn't even call an ambulance. After his doctor admonished him for "playing" with his life, Barreras started working out and taking medication. He was improving and went back to GHS.

Then COVID-19 hit. Barreras, who acknowledged he has underlying conditions, said, "the fear was there" of contracting the virus if schools reopened. So in December, he decided to take early retirement, which was granted by GMCS.

"I miss the kids; I love the kids," Barreras said. "It kills me to have to leave mid-year of their senior year."

The reaction when he told his students of his decision was not easy, either.

"I started crying. They started crying," Barreras said, before noting parents and students have begged him to stay at GHS. He still keeps his phone line open, helping them when he can.

BACK TO CLASS?

For now, retirement has left time for the finer things in life. Barreras, who has three kids — two of them adults — takes his daughter to softball practice and picks her up and drops her off at

Chief Manuelito Middle School. It's the chief reason, you could say, that Barreras declined an offer to teach at Hózhó Academy, for now.

"Now, we have that quality time," he said. "With my health the way it is, you never know how much time you have left."

But, Barreras added, it's a situation he doesn't want to live with forever.

"The number one killer in America is retirement," he said. "Now that I'm retired, it's the truth — nothing ages you more."

Barreras said he'll be back to the classroom in August — just not at GHS.

For now, he's basking in the honor of being Teacher of the Month, something he doesn't exactly think he deserves.

"A simple pat on the back goes a long way. But when you're nominated for an award like this, that just lights the fire to come back to the classroom," Barreras said.

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