

Teacher of the Month: Long time Tohatchi High teacher honored

Written by Dee Velasco

Friday, 24 February 2017 04:11



Congratulations to Camille's Sidewalk Cafe's Teacher of the Month, Fern Spencer. Spencer teaches Business and Vocational Office Education classes to 9th-12th grade students at Tohatchi High School.

Tisha Boyd of Camille's presented Spencer with a basket full of goodies at the school.

"I was surprised. I did not know that this happened, and it was really nice," Spencer said.

Spencer has been teaching students at Tohatchi for the past 42 years and says it's the kids that keeps her coming back. Spencer who is half Hopi and half Navajo has lived in the Tohatchi area since 1957.

Her dad, Roy Spencer, moved her family to the area. He was also a teacher and a health educator at Indian Health services. Her mother worked at the dorms of Tohatchi Indian boarding school, Chuska. She calls Tohatchi her home where she grew up having attended both elementary and middle school. She attended high school in Gallup.

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When she attended Gallup High School, there was a club called Future Teachers of America, which planted the seed for her to become a teacher.

“I really didn’t think I was going to become a teacher until much later in my educational life but the idea of it stayed with me,” she said. “I really wanted to become an administrative assistance or an administrative secretary.”

She applied for a Navajo scholarship and got it. Then came the decision as to where to go to college.

She decided upon Western New Mexico in Silver City, N.M., in which they had a two year program. Spencer joined the women’s basketball team and enjoyed it not knowing that this stint would prove valuable later on. Instead of two years, she completed four years, receiving her Bachelors of Arts in Business Education.

Shortly after receiving her degree, she came back to Tohatchi after the sudden death of her father. She began working for the tribe for a year until a job opened up at Tohatchi High.

Since then she has been the teacher for business and vocational classes, as well as being the athletic director while coaching basketball, track and field, and cross-country.

Although she wears many hats, Spencer’s passion has been the business and vocational classes – and she is the only teacher in the Gallup McKinley County Schools who has this type of class.

“We use to have it in each of our schools, but not anymore ... and I am the last of these teachers to teach it,” Spencer said. “In the job market today there are many people who are not proficient in how to get a job, and these kids need those skills in order to make it in the field they are going towards. They may not get the chance to go to college, but [if] they do, they at least have the skills to do it.”

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In the near future, Spencer and 12 of her students will head off to Albuquerque to compete in a competition called Business Professionals of America, against other schools in contests that consist of: job interview skills, fundamental word processing, advanced word processing and speeches.

Spencer hopes that her students win, and if so, then they hopefully get to head off to Florida for more competitions. It's these skills that Spencer has seen the rewards in many of her former students.

"Seeing where they go and how they get there is really tremendous. One of my former students is a heart surgeon in Albuquerque; some have become teachers (or) nurses," she said.

Spencer tells of challenges she faces each day like lack of funds and supplies. She said many teachers end up buying their own supplies. And computers need upgrades, and school trips need funded, she added.

"We use to have silversmith classes, home education, welding, Future Farmers of America," she said. "Our programs did a lot and it's too bad that we don't have them anymore ... once I leave there will be no more vocational classes."

But despite the challenges, she says it's the kids that keep her coming back and she loves it.

"I enjoy it and the kids I taught in the 70s," she said. "I'm teaching their kids now, grandkids, too. I like what I do, I guess if I'm still here for the past 42 years."

"It's a great career it keeps you young (laughs) ... so to speak, every day is different and you have to want to do this."

To nominate your favorite teacher, fill out a form at Camille's Sidewalk Cafe, (505) 722-5017.

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