

Teacher of the Month returns

Written by By Molly Ann Howell Sun Correspondent
Thursday, 24 November 2022 23:12



Hozho Academy teacher is this month's recipient

Each month, Camille's Sidewalk Café 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.

This month, Amanda O'Leary, who has worked at Hozho Academy for three years, is the recipient of the Teacher of the Month.

In an interview with the *Sun*, O'Leary said she had no intention of being a teacher when she started college in Wisconsin. Instead, she wanted to be an oceanographer. But when she realized that might be difficult with the nearest ocean being over 700 miles away from Madison, Wis., she changed her goal.

She graduated with two degrees in sociology and biology and spent six years in the Peace Corps building fish ponds and teaching English overseas. That's where she said she found her passion for teaching and decided to apply for the Peace Corps master's program.

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That decision led her to Albuquerque. She completed her master's in education in 1999.

"The choices [with the Peace Corps fellowship] when I was accepted, the choices were I could've gone to Mississippi, some place in Alabama [or to Gallup], and I was just thinking 'big city is not for me.' I really like the size of Gallup, it's perfect. I like the outdoorsy stuff too, it's pretty here," O'Leary said.

She began her teaching career at Gallup-McKinley County Schools by teaching at Tohatchi Elementary in 1999 before switching to Chee Dodge Elementary. She stayed home with her young children for seven years and then returned to GMCS in 2007.

O'Leary teaches fifth-grade math and science.

She said her favorite part about teaching is that each day is different.

"There's good days and there's bad days, but you never know from one day to the next what it's going to be," O'Leary explained. "It could be very enlightening, or it could be a major headache, but it's always different."

One thing that was definitely different was the challenge of COVID. O'Leary explained how the pandemic made her job as a teacher difficult.

"I think with this COVID thing, the kids don't know how to interact with each other," O'Leary said. "There's a lot of immaturity issues, and they don't know how to sit still. There's a lack of an attention span, and that's been very difficult."

Part of the problem, O'Leary said, was that when Roosevelt Elementary closed last year, the students weren't used to the changes. Before the school closed, they were seeing a new

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substitute teacher every day. And then COVID hit, and the students were sent home.

O'Leary said the kids are getting better now that things are returning back to normal. She said she prefers in-person learning to remote learning.

"Even when we had the pandemic I would have preferred to be in-person. I just think it's better because you can see reactions, you can see what the kids know and what they don't," O'Leary explained. "It's much easier to judge how your teaching is going – are they getting it or are they not getting it?"

O'Leary gave some advice to new teachers who are just starting out in their teaching careers.

"I would say to be consistently firm and don't lower your expectations. As soon as you lower your bar, they're going to give up; they're just going to be like, 'well, there's no consequences, so I'm not going to do it,'" O'Leary said. "Reward the ones [who do their work], and work with the ones who don't."

She said she makes sure to set boundaries with the students who don't finish their homework. If they don't, they often have to stay inside during recess to complete their homework.

Hozho Academy Principal Julianne Hillock said that O'Leary's boundaries and standards for her students make her a good teacher.

"She has high standards for students and she doesn't compromise them," Hillock said. "Sometimes it's hard for students to rise up to those expectations at the beginning, but by the end of the year those students are benefitting from those high expectations."

Sometimes, however, those high standards can have a somewhat negative effect. O'Leary said she was surprised to have won the award because it's been a difficult year for her.

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“I was super surprised, because I didn’t think my kids this year even liked me because I’m very persistent and very ‘this is what we do, this is our routine.’ Routine is essential,” O’Leary said. “So I didn’t know who nominated me, and I was trying to figure it out, and Ms. Hillock didn’t know, so when I did find out I was surprised because it was one of my students from last year.”

Despite her comments about the difficulty of being a teacher with high standards for her students, O’Leary said she has no plans to retire any time soon. She does know what she wants to do after retiring, though. She said she loves to garden.

“Someday, maybe when I’m retired, I would love to cross breed orchids and exotic plants,” O’Leary said.

She hopes to one day create a desert rose that blooms into multiple colors.

To nominate a teacher of the month, visit Camille’s Sidewalk Cafe at 306 S. Second St.

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