

Red Rock Elementary teacher finds work/life balance through theater

Written by By Molly Ann Howell Managing Editor
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Meet Camille's Teacher of the Month: KELLI Furney

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's award went to Kelli Furney, a fifth grade teacher at Red Rock Elementary.

PATH TO GALLUP

Furney has been with the Gallup-McKinley County Schools district since 2015, after she graduated from Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts. She moved to Gallup right after college because one of her close friends got hired at GMCS and so she moved out to New Mexico with her. Almost nine years later, the friend has moved away from New Mexico, but Furney's still here.

Although she graduated from college with a degree in psychology and a minor in behavioral analysis, Furney was able to use her education to join the alternative licensure program through the New Mexico Public Education Department.

She said she wasn't planning on going into elementary education, but now that she's here she loves it.

"I originally wanted to be a college professor, and then I decided I wanted to try something different, so I just kind of ended up in this position," she explained. "I wasn't anticipating staying in elementary, but after I finished my first year, I really liked it and I stayed."

MORE THAN TALKING

Teaching isn't just standing in front of kids and talking all day. Teachers write lesson plans and often have to analyze data to see how their students are doing and how they could improve. Furney said the "extra" parts of the job aren't as fun as being with the kids, but they make it all worth it.

"I really love working with the students. The students make everything worth it," she said. "I know there's a lot we have to do for the district and data and stuff, but really seeing the kids every day and building those relationships, that's the best part for me."

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When it comes to advice for new teachers, Furney said some new teachers may think they need to master everything at once. In reality, teaching is a multitude of things, and Furney said you can't get everything all at once.

"My advice would be to take one thing at a time, you don't have to do everything at once. Get one thing and then move to the next," she said. "There's so much in teaching, you're not going to be good at everything at once. Focus on one thing, get good at what you're doing, and move from there, and everything will piece itself together."

A KEY TAKEAWAY

One thing that Furney said didn't come naturally to her was classroom management. She explained how important classroom management can be, especially when you're in a room full of elementary school kids.

"Nothing can happen in your classroom if you can't manage your classroom, [and] you can't manage your classroom if you don't build relationships with your students," she said. "You've got to get your kids to like you and want to be around you. If you need to be weird and dress up like a superhero to teach something, do that."

Eva Prieto is the principal at Red Rock Elementary, and she has gotten the chance to work with Furney as a fellow teacher, an instructional coach, and as her principal. In all these roles, Prieto said she has seen Furney's dedication.

"Since I've known her, Kelli is extremely dedicated and committed to providing students the right amount of support for each kiddo," Prieto said. "She is excellent at just knowing students' needs and being able to diagnosis where they need the most supports and then just providing the right supports. That typically results in amazing proficiency and learning and growth for her students."

FINDING LIFE BALANCE

Despite her dedication and proficiency, just like anyone else, Furney's job isn't her whole life, although she said she does struggle with finding a good life/work balance. She participates in many extracurricular activities, including the Gallup Repertory Theater, a group she cofounded in 2017.

"I did theater kind of my entire life. I did it in high school and college, but when I moved out to Gallup there wasn't really any theater companies," Furney said. "So I got together with a few of my friends and we started a company."

The company puts on two to three shows a year and is open to both kids and adults. Their most recent show was *Madea*. Furney serves as the company's production manager. She also helps build the sets and manages the lighting crew.

She is currently putting together a children's production of *The Wizard of Oz*. She said theater is a sort-of escape for her.

"It's like a creative outlet for me when things get really rough with teaching or I get super stressed out," she explained. "It's definitely a creative outlet for me, it's how I unwind. I love watching theater, I love being involved in theater."

Leslie Farrell is a fellow founder of the Gallup Repertory Theatre. In an email to the *Sun* she said Furney's willingness to work with children also translates well in the company.

"Kelli is extremely hard-working and detail oriented. She is an amazing leader and can always

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be counted on to get things done,” Farrell said. “She often sees problems before they happen and always has several solutions if a crisis occurs - which it always does in live theatre! ... You can tell she loves working with the kids and is great at letting them discover their own way of doing things while at the same time guiding them in the right direction.”

Furney also has other hobbies besides theater. She has a true love for learning and is always eager to take on a new skill.

“I’m kind of a life-long learner, if I’m not working, I’m always looking for other things to learn,” she said. “I taught myself knitting. So, I’m always trying to learn things. I feel like having a love of learning leads to having a love of teaching.”

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