

Jo Nell Becenti named Camille's Sidewalk Café 'Teacher of the Month'

Written by By Molly Ann Howell Sun Correspondent
Friday, 22 April 2022 06:34



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, Jo Nell Becenti, who has worked for the Gallup-McKinley County Schools district for 25 years, is the recipient of the Teacher of the Month.

Becenti has spent her entire teaching career at GMCS, first at Gallup Middle School and then at Chief Manuelito Middle School. She's taught social studies for the past 25 years, but now the 2021-2022 school year will be her final year before she retires.

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When asked what she would be doing with all her free time once she retires, Becenti said she would spend time with her grandchildren, children, and elderly parents.

But she's not ruling out going back to work in some capacity.

"Whatever comes up, whatever is needed, wherever I'm needed, that's where I'd be willing to go. If it's a job at Walmart, if it's a job at a newspaper, if it's a job at a department store; whatever, I'm open," Becenti said.

She said she might even come back to teaching by substitute teaching for the district at some point, but it's just a thought for now.

Many of her fellow teachers said they would miss Becenti when she retires.

"I am going to miss her grave wisdom of life and of teaching," Annika Rogers, a fellow social studies teacher at Chief Manuelito Middle School, said in an email to the *Sun*. "I am going to miss her positivity. I am going to miss how she always puts students first in her decisions throughout a school day."

Rogers was actually the one who nominated Becenti for the Teacher of the Month award.

"I nominated Jo Nell because she deserves to be recognized for the influence she has had in her career," Rogers explained. "As she is retiring, I figured, this is the time for her to be recognized for the amazing person and educator that she is."

Becenti almost wasn't a teacher, though. She explained that she ultimately chose education over nursing when she was in college at the Gallup branch of the University of New Mexico.

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"I looked at myself more as a motivator," Becenti said. "I am a mother of three and again I've been teaching for 25 years, so I've had a lot of kids coming and going out of my life, so I do have the nurturing aspect, but [with] nursing I knew quite quickly that I didn't want to have to deal with the challenges and difficulties that all nurses have to deal with – you know the needles, the whole aspect of the physical pain."

Becenti said that her favorite part about teaching has been interacting with the kids. She said the students are "the most rewarding thing" about teaching.

As someone who has been teaching for such a long time, Becenti said the pandemic proved to be a difficult challenge for her.

"For me to not be able to [see the students] on a daily basis almost killed me, and it really took the fun out of teaching because students in middle school, they're still coming into their own and really trying to figure out who they are and they need help, and they need guidance," Becenti said. "Not all of them, but a lot of them need your advice and your nurturing ways – and maybe some tough love as well – and you just can't do that as an educator online."

In her many years of teaching, Becenti has been able to come up with a list of items of advice for young teachers.

Get to know your students

Establish the norms from Day One

Do not try to be your students' friend

Be a leader

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Be a motivator

Inspire your kids

Get them to see in themselves things they may not recognize

Push them to do great things

Get them to comfortably come out of their comfort zone

Ease them into the transition of taking chances and risks

Becenti puts "getting to know your students" as the top priority of all of that advice.

"But first and foremost establish your norms and get to know your students, because if they know that you care about them, they'll care about you and they'll definitely become more invested in what you're trying to teach," Becenti said.

Despite one of her rules being "do not try to be your students' friend," one of Becenti's co-workers Kimberly Scarborough, said the students always come back to see her.

"Once the kids leave, they're always coming back just to see her. She's the teacher everyone's always running up to at games or in the grocery store or wherever. [She's] the one you always wanted to introduce your parents to," Scarborough said.

Becenti said she looks back at her teaching years fondly as she sets to retire.

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"This has been a very very rewarding career for me and I have been blessed with not only great kids, but great colleagues throughout the years who I've learned so much from and that I will never ever ever forget about," Becenti said.

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

By Molly Ann Howell
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