

Lessons From the **WINNERS**

The Northwest's 2005 Teachers of the Year come from tiny towns and growing cities, from elementary and secondary schools. But one thing binds them together: a strong sense of commitment and caring for all students.

By MINDY CAMERON and RHONDA BARTON

A L A S K A

Ronnie Stanford



After 10 years of teaching music and directing high school bands in Texas, Ronnie Stanford left the profession. He was frustrated by a system he thought was too focused on competition.

"I found out quickly that I really missed it," he said. When he was recruited by a former Texas colleague to a job in Alaska, he said yes. "Barrow was not really what I had in mind," Stanford recalls, but after 10 years living in the vastness bordered by the Brooks Range to the south and the Arctic Ocean to the north, he has fallen in love with the area.

The North Slope Borough School District encompasses the largest county in the United States, an area about the size of Minnesota. Barrow, at 4,600, is the largest community. Seven other communities total about 3,000. About

330 students attend the high school; another 300 attend middle school.

Stanford teaches music at the middle and high schools and directs the Barrow High School band, overseeing what he calls "a high level of performance" and lots of work in the community. In announcing Stanford's selection as Alaska's 2005 Teacher of the Year, State Commissioner of Education & Early Development Roger Sampson praised him for focusing on "the unique qualities of each student" and building on their strengths "so that each child can maximize their potential."

That is the essence of Stanford's teaching philosophy. "Every student I teach is important. I try to gear what I'm doing to the individual student. I work with kids before and after school. I want my students to make connections between what they learn in the classroom and what is happening in their family and the outside world."

Stanford likes to work in collaboration with others. That is the norm at the middle school, but is a challenge at the high school due to time constraints and a lack of common planning periods, he points out. "I try to get to other teachers as much as possible because it's better than teaching in isolation."

Stanford believes in the "Four P's" of successful teaching: preparation, passion, patience, and persistence. He also believes in connections. All this was demonstrated in a band class last year.

The band played "Scrimshaw Tales," a piece commissioned many years ago for a high school band in a whaling community on the Atlantic coast.

"We live in an area where whales are hunted as part of a subsistence lifestyle. While learning "Scrimshaw Tales," I used books about whaling as part of the learning. I brought the texts into the classroom to show the connection between the music, whaling, and our community."

As a music educator, Stanford believes it's his job to also teach language and math and social studies. "Our job as teachers is to make connections."

He has high expectations for his students, two-thirds of whom are Inupiat Eskimo. "My kids don't know they shouldn't perform what they do."

Although he chafed under excessive competition in Texas, Stanford's music students in Alaska *do* compete. The Barrow High School band has won numerous awards, including first place in the Spirit of Chicago Award for the group that best represents its community and state.

WASHINGTON

Tamara Steen



Tamara Steen has wanted to teach since she was nine years old. “I loved to read, I loved to write, I loved to play school.” By age 13, she realized that’s what English teachers did all day long.

At 14, she had a chance to teach in a high school all day. “I just loved it,” she remembers. After 22 years of teaching “I still have that attitude,” she says.

That attitude, plus experience and a continual search for strategies that work for kids, earned Steen recognition as Washington’s 2005 Teacher of the Year and made her one of four finalists for national Teacher of the Year.

Steen grew up on a farm just 20 miles from where she now teaches, Mabton Junior/Senior High School. She left to get “as far away as I could,” saw the world, and then came back home.

Mabton is in the rural area of south-central Washington east of Yakima. The school district has two schools and serves a student population of 900 that is 93 percent Latino, with 86 percent qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch.

Steen’s philosophy grows out of her passion for literature and for teaching young people. “I believe what I do is important. I have a vision of success for these kids. That gives them confidence and they believe in themselves.”

Her search for how to help her students succeed keeps her on the lookout for new strategies. One that she has tried with considerable success is Shared Reading for a class of 15-year-old remedial students. Fourteen students—four females and 10 males—had 10 years of academic failure. Steen had them sit in a square and read aloud. She describes one lesson, reading an epic poem called “Sign of the Seahorse,” a children’s poem that deals with adult issues:

“As the students read, we’d use an overhead projector and ask questions about the language in the poem. The students would turn and talk to each other to answer the questions. The group was transformed. In four weeks they were talking about syntax and language. They were engaged in active reading. Some would stand up in the group waving their hands, loudly making their point. They ‘hated’ to read, but they loved the activity.”

Steen is proud of the progress students can make at Mabton. Half of the Advanced Placement (AP) students are from migrant families and many moved from remedial English as sophomores to AP classes as juniors. A number are headed to four-year colleges and universities, about to become the first in their family to attend college.

“I don’t dumb down literature for my kids,” Steen says. Even her Shared Reading class reads challenging classics such as *Beowulf* and *Romeo and Juliet*.

Like most effective teachers today, Steen is a firm believer in teacher collaboration. “Collaboration prevents burnout,” she said. One Friday a month is set aside for collaboration. This year, said Steen, “the conversation is shifting from ‘I wish our kids would ...’ to ‘what can I do better to ...?’ That shift is a result of our collaboration.”

MONTANA

Mary Wren



Mary Wren is very serious about having fun with math. “I try to make it fun so students aren’t afraid of math. I want to take the fear out of it and build confidence,” says Wren, who has taught for 16 years in Great Falls, Montana. Apparently it’s working. One parent has described how her two children responded to Wren: “You can almost see the light bulbs going on in their heads.”

Last year, Wren taught at Great Falls High School, but her first love is middle school and that’s where she is returning for the 2005–2006 school year. Great Falls, situated in the center of Montana along the Missouri River, hosts a school district with an enrollment that tops 11,000. Student population has fallen, however, prompting the closure of a middle school this fall. Sixth-graders will remain in their elementary schools.

Wren is “caring, compassionate, innovative, a problem solver, a leader who is highly respected by her peers, a master teacher,” said Paris Gibson Middle School Principal Shelly Fagenstrom after Wren was named Montana’s 2005 Teacher of the Year.

One area of Wren’s leadership is in teacher collaboration. “We’re all stronger when we work together,” she says. “The best teachers continue to learn and you do that best by collaborating and sharing ideas with other teachers.”

I D A H O

Paula Conley



At the middle school, Wren has teamed with another teacher to “loop” students so they have the same students continuously from seventh to eighth grade. “We are better able to see their growth and know what worked and what didn’t work,” she believes. Wren also teaches math in summer school.

Wren’s collaborative instincts and desire to make math fun led to a project called Pi Day for which she is likely to be well-remembered. Pi Day, which came at the end of a three-week unit studying pi, involved the entire middle school.

The celebration was on March 14, (3/14, of course). Students brought cans of food to donate to the local food bank (314 cans, of course), but first they discovered pi by measuring the circumference and diameter of the cans and finding the quotient of the two. Students created posters to decorate the hallways. One boy recited more than 100 digits of pi, others sang pi songs. English teachers had students compose “piku” instead of haiku.

Pi Day culminated in an assembly at which school counselors and an administrator received a “pi” in the face. “We worked together for the benefit of the kids and the community,” says Wren. It was also good for teachers, she believes. “A teacher who is growing is trying innovative ideas.”

Wren’s teaching philosophy is one that reaches well beyond the school door. “I believe the best thing any teacher can do is develop a relationship with kids and parents and involve the community. They don’t care how much you know as long as they know how much you care.”

Paula Conley was inspired to become a teacher by her great aunt, who taught for the U.S. Air Force. “The relationship my aunt had with her students had a profound effect,” states Conley, recalling that her aunt was in touch with many of her students for years afterward.

Teaching is the only thing Conley has ever wanted to do. She finished her education in Southern California during the teaching glut of the early 1970s and worked in other fields, including as an aerobics instructor and chef, before returning to her “true calling”—the classroom. When she finally made it into a classroom, Conley says, “I knew that was where I belonged.”

In 1990, she moved to the rapidly growing town of Coeur d’Alene in the Idaho Panhandle about 30 miles east of Spokane, Washington. The school district now enrolls 9,800 students. Conley has taught kindergarten, first, and fifth grades and is now a seventh-grade language arts teacher at Canfield Middle School, one of three middle schools in the Coeur d’Alene School District.

After she was named Idaho’s 2005 Teacher of the Year, Principal Jeff Bengston told an area newspaper “Paula’s awesome. She just connects so well with kids. She forges that relationship first; then she makes sure they learn.”

One way Conley maintains her relationship with students is a simple, consistent gesture. Every day she stands at the door of her classroom and greets each student with a handshake and a “good morning” (or “good afternoon”). It’s a practice she began with first-graders in her first year of teaching and has continued throughout her career, including with adult university students.

It’s contagious. Now all the teachers on her side of the wing at Canfield Middle School do the same. “It’s a way to have daily direct contact with each student,” she asserts. “It lets students know I care about them and sets the stage for learning.”

Conley’s teaching philosophy is that high expectations must be coupled with plenty of support. In her classroom there is no “can’t.” “That word does not exist,” she says. “Students can say ‘I’m struggling’ or ‘this is difficult.’”

Collaboration is a big part of Conley’s teaching life. She has been involved in district, state, and national committees. At Canfield, the three language arts teachers “collaborate on everything.” That way, says Canfield, “you can’t play one teacher off another. It is excellent for students and parents. You come up with great stuff when you have three heads instead of one.”

After 23 years of teaching, Conley is still excited about being in the classroom. “I can’t imagine not going into a classroom,” she said. “I’ll retire when I don’t want to get up in the morning and go to school.”

Conley sees teachers as builders to the future. “Now I’m like my aunt. Students come back to see me. They still know I won’t accept mediocrity. If that’s what I’ve contributed to this world, I think that’s an awesome contribution.”

OREGON

Steve Wyborney



If you want to know what makes Steve Wyborney a great teacher, just ask his fifth-graders at Nyssa Elementary.

Alison will tell you “he makes boring subjects fun.” She confides that “social studies has boredom written all over it, but ever since I came to Mr. Wyborney’s classroom it’s been very exciting.” Like the time he gave every student five pennies and then started taxing them on their books and paper, giving students some insights into the colonists’ indignation over the Tea Act.

Loughlin thinks “a good teacher should be educational and funny at the same time.” He and his classmates report that sometimes the classroom phone rings and Mr. Wyborney leaves the room, only to return moments later as “The Denominator.” In a thick Arnold Schwarzenegger accent, Wyborney will launch into a math lesson by complaining that “The Denominator” has to hold up all the other numbers—including “those wimpy numerators.”

In a decadelong teaching career—all spent at this small, high-poverty school tucked away in the eastern corner of Oregon, almost straddling the Idaho border—Wyborney has spearheaded campaigns that are the stuff of legend. In 2004, he challenged his class to bring in box tops of General Mills products and to get their relatives around the country to contribute as well. The drive wasn’t just a fundraiser—the company pays 10 cents for each box top turned in—but also a lesson in statistical probability, letter writ-

ing, and goal setting. “I wanted them to consider something that normally would be pretty much impossible to do and then think, maybe we could do that,” he says. “To see a goal and go for it.”

As box tops poured in, Wyborney extended the challenge schoolwide and made a bet with Principal Geno Bates. When the school’s 540 students amassed more than 7,400 box tops, Bates made good on the bet: He sat on the roof of the school gymnasium for three hours while students took turns coming outside to say hello.

Bates encouraged Wyborney to apply for the Teacher of the Year award because “he makes learning come alive.” He praises Wyborney’s enthusiasm and his innovative use of technology, especially in teaching math. “He takes those concepts, puts them on the computer, manipulates them so kids can see transformations. Not only do they hear it, write it, and do it, but they see it, which makes them really understand what he’s talking about.” Superintendent Don Grotting adds, “There are lots of special people here, but kids gravitate to Steve. We’d like to clone him.”

For Wyborney, the most important thing he can give his kids as they head for middle school is his profound belief in their capacity for learning. “Some of my students have significant challenges, including language challenges, but I firmly believe that every one of them is absolutely incredible. I hope that belief is what they take with them: knowing that about themselves. That’s the most important thing.” ■

Since 1952, the National Teacher of the Year program has focused public attention on excellence in teaching. One outstanding teacher is selected by each state and a national winner is chosen by representatives of major education organizations. The program is sponsored by Scholastic Inc. with support from the Council of Chief State School Officers and the ING Foundation.

AN AWARD-WINNING DISTRICT

The tiny Nyssa School District—with its 65 percent Hispanic enrollment—can boast not only about having Oregon’s Teacher of the Year but also about receiving one of Oregon’s 2005 Celebrating Student Success awards. It was the only school district recognized by State Superintendent Susan Castillo for gains in improving student achievement. More than 90 percent of the elementary school students meet or exceed state benchmarks for math and reading and typically 95 percent of parents attend parent-teacher conferences. Nyssa Elementary School Principal Geno Bates ticks off some of the reasons behind his school’s success: full-day kindergarten, class sizes that rarely exceed 19 students, looping teachers, and early dismissal every Friday that allows staff to meet and receive regular professional development. “We don’t get anything extra,” says Bates, “we just spread the money out and use it as effectively as possible. We may go without some things—like supplies—but not where it affects the kids.”