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Rules of Engagement

By Diane Claytor



Rheem Elementary School third-grade teacher Ann Ralph in class. Photo Diane Claytor

Visitors to Ann Ralph's Moraga classroom shouldn't be surprised to see her 23 third graders stomping their feet and swinging their arms to some jazzy music. Or, if they arrive during "genius hour," visitors might have the opportunity to hear one of the students say "I'm a genius at ..." and then make a presentation on what makes people ticklish, or how to teach a parakeet to talk. The kids get to choose something they really want to learn about. "I want the kids to come here, learn and have fun. I want them to leave every day wanting to come back the next day." Ralph said.

With five younger siblings, Ralph has undoubtedly been teaching since she was a child. And with seven older siblings, the Orinda native was obviously being taught from a very young age. "It was part of our family dynamic to show the younger kids how to do things ... tie a bow, hold a pencil, make a bed," she said. But it wasn't until she was a close to graduating from UC Berkeley that Ralph realized teaching was "her calling." Following graduation, she moved to Southern California, received her credential from Cal State Long Beach and began her illustrious teaching career, spending eight years teaching in parochial schools.

Moving back to the Lamorinda area to be closer to her large, extended family and raise her own children, Ralph returned to teaching in 1996, joining the staff at Moraga's Donald Rheem Elementary School. For 13 years, she taught fifth grade, which she loved. "I loved the rich curriculum, the challenges. It was so exciting to teach math, science, U.S. history," she explained. When an opening for a third grade teacher presented itself several years ago, Ralph decided to make the move. "Third graders are still so impressionable, they want to do what's right and it's my job to show them," she said. "If the kids can walk into my classroom, know it's going to be fun but also know that I have high expectations, they'll always rise to the occasion."

Ralph is one of four teachers from the Lamorinda area nominated to represent their districts in the 2014-15 Contra Costa County Teacher of the Year competition. According to Rheem's principal, Elaine Frank, Ralph is the "perfect choice" for Moraga's Teacher of the Year. She is "well respected by students, parents and colleagues. She consistently designs lessons that promote student engagement ... has infectious energy ... and diligently challenges students to think independently and creatively."

"Teaching would be far less exciting for me if I didn't always try to find ways to engage the kids," Ralph said. She spends hours researching, reading blogs, learning what works for other teachers. As Frank observed, "Ralph has a constant desire to learn more, take risks, improve. ... She is enthusiastic about new programs, methodologies and systems to promote deeper learning."

Ralph says she "loves trying new things. ... If I was the kind of teacher that did the same things every year, I probably would have retired by now."

Frank noted that Ralph's fearlessness at trying new things is most impressive. "She knows

there will be bumps along the way," she stated, "but she embraces the challenges as growth opportunities."

Ralph is extremely humbled by the Teacher of the Year nomination, noting that she sincerely appreciates the recognition but is fully aware "that I couldn't accomplish this without my grade level colleagues, the support of the parents, principal, the entire staff."

Contra Costa County began recognizing outstanding teachers in 1972, establishing the Teacher of the Year program, which is directed by the Contra Costa County Office of Education. It is open to all K-12 teachers in public and private schools. The selection process involves both in-person observations of the nominees by a committee of education specialists followed by a personal interview with each of the district's Teacher of the Year representatives.

Lamorinda Weekly will feature Lafayette School District representative Olivia Vann of Springhill Elementary School in an upcoming issue. The Acalanes Union High School District Educator of the Year, Jane Kelson, was featured in the March 12 issue of Lamorinda Weekly and the Orinda School District Teacher of the Year representative, Trisha Newhart, was featured in the May 7 issue.

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