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## Love of Art and Literature

By Diane Claytor



Springhill Elementary School teacher Olivia Vann with her students. Photo Diane Claytor

degree and teaching credential at Saint Mary's College. She knew at an early age that she wanted to teach and her passion hasn't waned in 34 years. Springhill principal Heather Duncan said that Vann "is one of the most dedicated and passionate teachers I know."

Vann has spent her entire teaching career in Lafayette, beginning at Burton Valley Elementary School in 1980, teaching fifth and sixth graders and, since 1995, teaching third grade at Springhill; this was her first year teaching second grade and she loved it. It's a fun grade, she said, with kids who are trusting, loving and lovable. "They grow so much in this grade," Vann noted. "I was just looking at their work from September and got teary-eyed seeing how much they've grown. But they still believe in magic."

Vann believes that learning should be magical and reports that she "throws her entire spirit and soul into teaching with creativity and abandon. In my classroom, learning is experienced in a variety of ways and every student is uniquely appreciated." She practices integrated learning where both sides of the brain - the intellectual side and creative side - are melded together. A good teacher, Vann said, continues to expand children's imaginations, and doesn't forget to include the creative, artistic side.

Principal Duncan noted that anytime you walk into Vann's classroom, "you will see children engaged in meaningful work. They master skills while hardly knowing they are doing so because of the creativity incorporated in each lesson ... children are inspired to achieve."

Her love of both literature and art was apparent throughout Vann's classroom. She describes herself as a "classical teacher," noting that while technology certainly has its place in a learning environment, she believes that "children really need to connect their thoughts with their hands and their minds." She doesn't just read a story to her students; she puts voices to each of the characters, making the story come alive. She hopes that books will transport her students into the worlds of their imagination.

It's not only academics that Vann brings to her classroom. "We are a classroom family," she said, and "I try to inspire my students to respect and care for each other. I don't want to just teach them. I want to inspire them to be the best they can be, both academically and personally."

And Vann herself continues to learn. "I think that's one of the reasons I'm still so excited about teaching," she said. "I still have so much passion and energy for it because I'm constantly

Exuberant was the first word that came to mind when meeting Springhill Elementary School teacher and Lafayette School District's 2014-15 Teacher of the Year nominee Olivia Vann. Other adjectives were dynamic, personable and passionate. Nearing the end of the year, her second grade classroom was awash in colorful artwork, animal projects and written stories. Every possible space had something hanging from it, pinned to it or sitting on it. And considering it was the end of the week, the room was incredibly neat. The previous evening was Open House, Vann explained, the "last hurrah" for her 24 second graders. As the class was dismissed for the weekend, several kids stayed back to proudly show a visitor their work and give Vann a big hug. It was obvious that the students loved her as much as she loved them.

The Martinez native and daughter of immigrant parents received both her undergraduate

evolving, learning new ways to revamp the programs to keep them fresh and current."

"Teaching is truly an art form," Vann proclaimed. "To be able to guide the next generation, giving them the tools and confidence to become great readers, writers, mathematicians and creative thinkers is to inspire a better world."

Contra Costa County began recognizing outstanding teachers in 1972, establishing the Teachers 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 featured the Acalanes Union High School District Educator of the Year, Jane Kelson, in the March 12 issue of Lamorinda Weekly; the Orinda School District Teacher of the Year representative, Trisha Newhart, in the May 7 issue; and the Moraga School District Teacher of the Year representative, Ann Ralph, in the May 21 issue.

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