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Longtime teacher known for changing hearts and minds, bids LES farewell

By Sharon K. Sobotta



Sofia Lares, Emi Perez and Espi Estrada-Sobotta with LES teacher, Dr. Dana Fry. Photo Sharon K. Sobotta

Dana Fry has much more than math, writing and reading on her agenda when she walks into her fourth-grade classroom every morning. "I want all my students to know that I like and respect them just the way they are," Fry says. "(Being yourself) is hard these days. I hope my students look back and say that my classroom was a place where they felt safe to be themselves."

With 30 years as an educator under her belt, Fry - who is retiring this year after 14 years at LES - has purpose behind all she does. "My students call me Dr. Fry because I have a doctorate of educational leadership (for social justice)." Fry doesn't share that to be boastful, but rather as a testament to her passion for lifelong learning (as she got her doctorate in 2014) and her intention to show her students that anything is possible. "People come from backgrounds where education wasn't accessible. Some people might come to school hungry or in pain because they have a cavity or sad because they're dealing with something big at home," Fry says. "

(My goal is) to reach kids exactly where they are, accept them and then move forward from there."

While Fry is committed to reaching children across the gender spectrum, she's particularly proud of giving the girls she teaches a glimpse at a larger world with more possibilities than they may have imagined for themselves. "I bring engineering projects to the classrooms to show girls that they are good at math. They do have spatial recognition skills that they can do things that are seen as male jobs," Fry says. "I want to get my students out of a single track mindset."

Neither Fry nor her students will dispute her reputation as a strict teacher. "Children need boundaries. It's important for them to learn I can go up to this point, but not beyond that one," Fry says. "It makes them feel safe."

Tait Foster says he was a little worried about Fry being a strict teacher, but quickly changed his mind. "I learned (from Dr. Fry) never to judge a book by its cover," Tait says. "She's really funny and she makes learning a breeze." Tait's not alone in his views. There's a seemingly unanimous sentiment of love for learning among Fry's students that has them more sad about parting ways with their teacher and less eager about starting summer break.

"She uses funny voices while reading," Emi Perez says. "When something is confusing, she teaches us to use common sense to solve our problems."

"Common sense can't be taught and it can't be given to you," Fry explains. "We talk through how to solve a problem even if it's for something very simple like not having a pencil. We can go ask somebody. Use our words. Eleanor Roosevelt said 'do something everyday that frightens you' and I try to teach that."

A slightly shy fourth-grade girl lit up while describing being granted a gigantic piece of land by Dr. Fry during the California land project. For the assignment, Dr. Fry acted as the governor of California and the children had to request the number of acres they wanted and share their plan for using the land. "Most students requested five or 10 acres, but one requested over a thousand acres and I granted it to her," Fry explains with a smile. Dr. Fry hopes she planted seeds for a larger life lesson with that particular unit. "Don't be afraid to ask for what you want or need. Don't be afraid of the word 'no,'" Fry says. "You may be told 'no' a lot, but you might also get a yes."

Retirement has been on Fry's mind for a few years, but she wanted her final year to be one in which she worked alongside the students inside a classroom, not through a screen. "The best part about in-person learning is being able to reach each student (where they are) to support them and motivate them," Fry says. "I'll leave with a warm feeling toward my career."

While Fry imagines making her way back to a community college classroom at some point, in her next chapter she'll be more accessible to parents than children as she embarks on a new gig as a wine ambassador at Fenestra Winery in Livermore. "I don't know much about wine (yet); I'll need to refine my palette." Fry says. "I've got more to learn. I'm a lifelong learner."

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