



FIRST THINGS FIRST

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Principal motivates learning with 40 boxes of cold cereal and a pony

(LITTLEFIELD) - Behind every great educator is the person who inspired them. For Beaver Dam Elementary Principal Phyllis Leavitt, it was her first grade teacher, Ida Beutler.

“I remember my first day of school in her class,” Leavitt said. “The bulletin board had painted caterpillars made out of egg cartons and butterflies made out of netting, glitter, and fuzzy pipe cleaners. I was completely charmed. I think it was Mrs. Beutler that made me idolize teachers. I’ve never stopped loving school and learning.”

Leavitt believes in not only cultivating an appreciation of learning in her students, but also helping them develop their sense of worth and a new awareness of the growing world around them. That attitude is just one of the reasons Leavitt was selected by the First Things First La Paz/Mohave Regional Partnership Council as the region’s 2013 Champion for Young Children, according to First Things First Regional Director Merritt Beckett.

The Champion for Young Children Award is presented annually to an individual who has made significant contributions to the field of early childhood development and health. Beckett said recipients exemplify extraordinary commitment to young children, the betterment of early childhood services, and have made a positive difference in the lives of children in the region. Previous recipients include Mohave County Superior Court Judge Richard Weiss and Mohave Community College Education Coordinator Peggy Federici.

Colorado River High School Superintendent Riley Frei is chair of the La Paz/Mohave Regional Partnership Council. He is also one of Leavitt’s former students.

“Having been blessed with the experience of having Mrs. Leavitt my own kindergarten teacher, I know that her impact continues to be felt in the lives of students long after they leave her classroom,” he said.

Leavitt started teaching when she was just 8 years old. Her first students were her three little sisters – along with six teddy bears, three stuffed dogs and every doll in the house.

“I would stand before them and teach. Some of my students were more responsive than others,” she joked.

In 2010, Leavitt signed on with the Littlefield Unified School District to assume the role of principal at Beaver Dam Elementary. The school’s mascot is the eagle and she affectionately refers to her students as her flock of eaglets.

“Phyllis loves the students,” said Mark Coleman, principal of Beaver Dam Middle School/High School. “You can hear it in her voice and see it in her eyes when she is talking about them and working with them.”

Leavitt believes in rewarding the success of her eaglets, whether that means recognizing “Hard Hat” winners for their academic improvements, or giving students with perfect attendance each month a shot at the “Mystery Door.”

“A student with perfect attendance has their name drawn out of a bucket,” Leavitt explained. “They can either choose the envelope with cash or the “Mystery Door.” They obviously love the mystery door best because it always has something amazing behind it, like 40 boxes of cold cereal or a giant stuffed peanut butter monster with a whole basket of peanut butter. One month there was a live horse behind the “Mystery Door.” That was really cool. “

Leavitt is described by students and staff as the fastest woman in high heels. Her day starts at 6 a.m. when she meets with the lunch lady.

“She knows everything about everybody and is my pipeline to the world,” she said. “Then I meet with Jaime, our custodian. He makes sure I don’t have any “honey do’s” for him.”

But Leavitt’s day doesn’t really get in full swing until the kids start to arrive.

“I am the first person you will encounter as you come through our building because I love this school and want to know exactly what is going on and who is coming and going,” she said.

Littlefield Unified School District Superintendent Michael Robison credits Leavitt with singlehandedly organizing a program that provides for the needs of families and their young children from birth through kindergarten.

Robison said Leavitt made arrangements to house the Teaching Learning Center next door to the preschool funded by First Things First, so that services for children ages 3 to 5 are coordinated with services provided to the younger children in TLC.

The kindergarten classroom is in the same corridor, allowing for a full range of services for families with children ages birth to six years old.

Leavitt is also credited by teachers as leading by example.

“When I come to work, Mrs. Leavitt is there,” said teacher Wendie Black. “When I go home, she is still there. This in spite of the fact that her home is over an hour’s drive away through the isolated Arizona strip.”

Black said that under Leavitt’s leadership, more than half of her staff have pursued National Board Certification, the most rigorous undertaking offered to teachers.

“It’s an example of how Mrs. Leavitt supports and encourages her staff to be the best educators and caretakers possible,” Black said.

Leavitt said the most rewarding part of teaching are the everyday exchanges she has with children.

“When a student comes in and proudly shows me their schoolwork, or sends me a note, or draws a picture to hang on my office door, or giggles as they say “hi”, or shyly thanks me for remembering them – that’s what makes my life fantastic,” she said.

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About First Things First – First Things First is a voter-created, statewide organization that funds early education and health programs to help kids be successful once they enter kindergarten. Decisions about how those funds are spent are made by local councils staffed by community volunteers. To learn more, visit azftf.gov.