

Teaching outside the box

Written by By Kevin Opsahl Sun Correspondent
Thursday, 31 December 2020 07:24



Indian Hills' Melanie Van Dorp utilizes classroom donations in COVID-19 era

Each month, Camille's Sidewalk Cafe recognizes one local teacher within the Gallup area for his or her determination to help students go above and beyond. Prospective teachers are nominated by students who feel they deserve to be recognized.

Melanie Van Dorp, a third grade teacher at Indian Hills Elementary School in Gallup, is December's pick. She spoke to the *Gallup Sun* about her upbringing, her career path and teaching style.

EARLY LIFE

Van Dorp is a native of Canada, where she grew up in Stony Mountain, Manitoba. She considered herself motivated and a hard-worker when it came to tending the family farm.

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But school wasn't easy for Van Dorp because, in her view, the teachers never "thought outside of the box."

"I think I would have strived a lot more with different teaching styles," she said.

The exception to all of them was her 5th grade teacher, who had multiple animals in the classroom, including two rats who had 21 babies.

"He made school a little bit more exciting," Van Dorp said. "I remember that teacher trying to reach out to me."

When none of her other teachers did, she thought, "One day I'm going to be a teacher and I'm going to do things differently."

GETTING INTO TEACHING

After a stint at University of Manitoba, Van Dorp transferred to Dordt University, a liberal arts college in Sioux Center, Iowa.

"It was amazing to me when I was passionate about becoming a teacher that classes just became that much easier to me. Something clicked," she said.

Van Dorp graduated with a double major in Elementary Education and Health and Physical Education.

By that time, she had fallen in love with New Mexico, where she had chosen to do her student teaching. It was because of the state's red rock landscape, her students' Navajo roots and the band of teachers — not to mention her own "adventurous spirit."

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“They call New Mexico ‘the Land of Enchantment,’ and I just kind of feel there’s something magical keeping me here,” Van Dorp said.

VAN DORP’S CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE

Van Dorp has been at Indian Hills Elementary her entire career, teaching 1st and 5th grade before delving into 3rd. What’s special about that grade, Van Dorp said, is it is the perfect middle ground between the other two.

Her classroom is an open space with wobble stools and pillows. The chairs even have bouncy bands across the legs to provide her students movement to help them focus on instruction and not feel tethered to a desk all day.

But COVID-19 has changed all that. Indian Hills has gone to complete virtual instruction from home due to the number of coronavirus cases in the area, forcing Van Dorp to use her own creativity to provide instruction.

That includes utilizing donorschoose.org, a public charity established to help teachers fund and make classroom projects a reality. When Van Dorp wanted to teach her students about different inventors, the donations of bubble gum, chocolate chip cookies and Ramen Noodles were crucial, so they could learn about the people behind those creations.

Van Dorp said Teacher of the Month is an honor that means a lot to her.

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“Sometimes, it’s exhausting. I feel like I go above and beyond,” Van Dorp said about teaching. “It’s nice to know that what I’m doing is making a difference in my students’ life and it motivates me to keep thinking outside the box.”

James and Kimberley Rich said:

“We have come to know of Melanie’s kindness and generosity since Camille’s first opened its doors. Mrs. Van Dorp has always embraced our café, our community and our children. Most people don’t realize that Mrs. Van Dorp was instrumental in launching the ArtsCrawl program on behalf of the Business Improvement District. Her enthusiasm is infectious and we can’t get enough of her warm personality. Melanie is a blessing to our community, to our children, and we are so grateful for her dedication to Gallup.

“Thank you for everything you continue to do, you deserve all the recognition we can offer.”

Interested in nominating your favorite teacher for Teacher of the Month?

Contact Camille’s Sidewalk Cafe at (505)722-5017 or stop by 306 S. Second St. in Gallup.

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Sun Correspondent