

‘Breath of fresh air’

Written by By Kevin Opsahl Sun Correspondent
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Gallup High SPECIAL ED TEACHER HAILED AS MOTHERLY

Camille’s Sidewalk Café selects a teacher every month to be recognized and celebrated from within the Gallup area. Nominees are selected based on votes from students and their families on how and why they feel their teacher deserves the award of “Teacher of the Month.”

Louella Manlegro, a special education teacher at Gallup High School, received the honor this month. She spoke with the *Gallup Sun* about why she loves teaching students with special needs, how she got interested in a career in the classroom, and life in her native country, the Philippines.

EARLY YEARS

Calling herself a proud product of a Jesuit education, Manlegro graduated from college in the Philippines with degrees in sociology and development communication. Faculty members wanted her to go into teaching, but she told them “That’s not my world.”

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A UNICEF project she became involved with changed all of that. Manlegro was trained as one of five “street educators,” helping troubled youth.

“That was my exposure [to] working with children,” she said. “That was really the start of it all.”

Later, a friend encouraged her to go into special education.

“She said, ‘you’re working with the disadvantaged kids. So why don’t you just join the education sector formally?’” Manlegro said.

She obtained her education degree while working at an elementary school.

“I couldn’t even 100 percent explain, ‘why am I in special education?’” Manlegro said. “I would say special education is the road less taken. A lot of people would want to be teachers, but a lot are hesitant to be in special education because of the demands of the work.”

‘A CALLING, NOT A CAREER’

Manlegro came to the U.S. in 2008, when she was hired to teach at a school in North Carolina. In 2011, she came to New Mexico to teach in Roswell. Five years later, the Gallup-McKinley School District hired her to work at Gallup High School.

She calls the state where she teaches “truly the Land of Enchantment,” in part because she feels the students and parents are close-knit, which reminds her of families in the Philippines.

As a special education teacher, she works in the classroom with teachers to provide them assistance with any student who has special needs.

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She is also a “case carrier,” who is responsible for making sure the special needs students are receiving the right services and that all obligations are being met by the classroom teacher.

That’s one aspect of her job that Mary Ann Seslar, a GHS science teacher, highlighted when asked by the *Sun* why Manlegro was the right choice for Teacher of the Month.

“Her integrity, above all else, is amazing,” Seslar said. “She dots all the i’s and crosses the t’s and she checks the paperwork and she makes sure we are in compliance all of the time.”

Romalda Garcia, who has a child with special needs attending GHS, said Manlegro helped her register for class and understand complex course material by speaking with her one-on-one. All of that was especially important during the virtual year of learning throughout the pandemic, she said.

“As a parent, you know that [the] dedication of a teacher like that goes way beyond words,” Garcia said. “You know that when she talks to you, she cares and she’s concerned about your child, and when she says she’ll keep in touch, she definitely does.”

Manlegro believes it is the job of educators to “provide an avenue for tapping every kid’s potential.”

“We’re duty-bound to give them maximum opportunities,” she said.

Seslar, who regularly has special needs students in her classroom, recognizes the importance of having someone like Manlegro by her side.

“She really is thorough with the kids that are in her classes and the kids that are on her caseload,” Seslar said. “She knows what the kids need. She knows the best way to reach

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them.”

Two teachers work as a team, planning everything from new creative lessons to seating arrangements.

“When we talk together, we can really read each other,” Seslar said.

Manlegro describes herself as a teacher who “goes the extra mile” and approaches working with the students as if they’re her own kids.

In fact, Seslar described Manlegro as “motherly” — firm, but kind.

Manlegro feels flattered and humbled to be the Teacher of the Month — but she never felt entitled to it.

“When I do my job, I don’t expect anything to come back,” she said.

Seslar, on the other hand, believes the honor is well-deserved.

“Louella is a breath of fresh air,” she said. “She’s a good friend both in and out of the classroom. She’s an excellent teacher.”

By Kevin Opsahl
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