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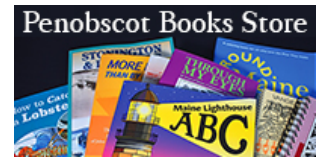
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DEER ISLE

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Flores receives Presidential Award for excellence in teaching

by Clark Tate

Michele “Mickie” Flores, a K-6 science teacher at Deer Isle-Stonington Elementary School, is a self-described geek. That’s why she teaches. “When I was nearing the end of my college years, I thought, ‘Who is it that gets to learn new things all the time?’” said Flores. “And I identified teaching as that career.” She stands by her choice, and it’s paying off. In early February, she received the Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching. It is the nation’s highest honor for teachers of kindergarten through grade 12 math and science.

“It is incredible, and I am so honored and thankful to win the award,” said Flores. “I truly believe that I’m even more thankful to be teaching here....” She describes it as a phenomenal place to be a teacher. “I think the award reflects the support that I’ve gotten from my administrators, from my teaching colleagues, from my students and their families, and from the community at large.”

The award brings with it national recognition and \$10,000, no strings attached. Traditionally, winners travel to Washington, D.C., for ceremonies and professional development events. This year, celebrations will be held virtually. To Flores, all of that is well and good, but what she actually sounds excited about is connecting with the other award recipients.

“I’ve been working very hard to build a network ever since I came here because this is a pretty geographically isolated place,” she said. Now she will join a network that includes this year’s 102 award winners, plus the 5,200 educators that have been recognized since 1983. “I feel like my network just exponentially grew, that I will have so many more resources, not just physical resources but thought and creative resources to bring back to this community,” she said.

Opportunity knocks

How did she build the network she already has? “I just started saying yes to every opportunity, whether that was mainland Science Alliance or the Gulf of Maine Research Institute. I’ve really gotten to know a lot of people and a lot of agencies throughout the state.” That includes Deer Isle’s Haystack Mountain School of Crafts and their Massachusetts Institute of Technology supported Fab Lab. There her students learn coding, design, 3D printing and laser cutting.

The opportunities started to build on one another. “I kept saying yes, but then I became a known commodity,” Flores explained. For example, she attended a citizen scientist workshop at the Gulf of Maine Research Institute and connected with the workshop’s leader, Christine Boyer. When Boyer realized that the Institute had a grant to demonstrate that Maine’s Next Generation Science Standards could be taught outdoors, she thought of Flores.



In early February, Michele “Mickie” Flores, a K-6 science teacher at Deer Isle-Stonington Elementary School, received the Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching. It is the nation’s highest honor for teachers of kindergarten through grade 12 math and science.

Photo courtesy of Mickie Flores

That led to Flores establishing the elementary school's nature trail roughly seven years ago. "And now we have a nature trail that's 3/10ths of a mile long, including 1/10th of a mile that's handicap accessible. And I've presented at different conferences on how to teach without a textbook, how to be outdoors," she said.

"So if somebody from another school anywhere says, 'this is my topic, this is my unit, got any ideas?' I would hope I could help them," said Flores. "In return, I'm hoping that I can call on this new network of teachers that I'm going to know and say, 'this is what my third grade teacher is teaching, anybody got some great ideas for hands-on, experiential, outdoor learning?'"

New audience

Flores taught high school chemistry in New York for nearly 30 years before "retiring" to Deer Isle. It didn't stick. "I couldn't stay away," she laughed. "Those back-to-school fliers would come out in August, and I would start to weep." She started subbing at the elementary school and teaching science full-time in 2010. She could not have been better prepared.

"In New York State, I also was an adjunct professor for the State University of New York at Potsdam, and I taught how to teach science in the elementary school classroom. I did that for 10 years. So I basically have been developing a whole lot of the stuff that I have since used," she said.

But actually teaching in an elementary school was new. She didn't start teaching to be around children. "I became a teacher because I like to learn. And in the process, I discovered that I do like children," Flores said. "And they make me laugh. And it's fun. So that's why, 39 years later, I'm still laughing in the classroom, because we just have a lot of fun together."

There are the plays—kids dramatizing the circulatory system by dressing up as white blood cells and germs and dueling it out with nerf swords. There are science-inspired art projects—drawing fantasy flowers with correctly labeled pistils, stigmas and ovaries or creating construction paper arthropods that demonstrate bilateral symmetry. And there are the dramatic demonstrations—creating a cloud (fog, really) in a plastic bottle using pressure, water and a match.

Flores goes to all this fun trouble with a goal in mind. "I hope they take from me an enthusiasm for learning and that they recognize that learning is not always easy," she said, "but they are perfectly capable of mastering new knowledge and new skills."

Flores takes knowledge very seriously, something that the school principal, Tara McKechnie, noted in a recommendation letter to the award committee. The last time McKechnie observed Flores in the classroom, she commented on the rigor of the material. Since Flores reads constantly, she stays up to date on new scientific terms and concepts. And that's what she teaches. "You know, teach them the real stuff," she said. "That's how I feel, and let them master the real concepts and real skills."

Sage advice

For anyone new to teaching, Flores has a few words of wisdom. First, find a mentor. Second, draw a circle and divide it into thirds with a peace sign. "The top third is relationships with students; you cannot teach anybody until you have a relationship with them," she said. The left third is your system. "Supporting your fellow teachers...recognizing that the custodial staff, and the secretarial staff, and the cafeteria is just as much a part of your everyday life and you want to include them."

The final piece is the standards, curriculum and content. "And that's actually the least important part," Flores said. "You can worry about that last...get along with the kids. Figure out how to operate within the school. And then think about what you want to teach and how you want to teach it."

When Flores thinks about her impact, she thinks about the top three graduating seniors from Deer Isle-Stonington last year. "They're all going into science," she said. To her, those are the real rewards.

"It is a huge, huge honor," she said. "But, on a daily basis, the children in front of me are more relevant and demanding than the Presidential Award."

Flores holds a bachelor degree in animal science from Cornell and a master of science from Elmira College. When she attends the virtual award ceremony with the White House on February 24, she will be in Atlanta with three of her grandchildren. "When I jump up and down, get excited, I'm going to have three of my grandchildren jumping up and down with me," she said. "That's all I know."

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