

Chippewa Valley district teachers of the year recognized

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Laura Ferrans

TOWNSHIP— For Donald Kuntz, teaching was exactly what he was looking for.

After spending time in the Marines and having a brief career as an architect, Kuntz began his teaching career as a student teacher at Dakota High School in 1997.

Kuntz began teaching math professionally at Dakota in 1998, and 18 years later, he remains a fixture in the school's math department.

For his efforts and career accomplishments, Kuntz was recently selected as the district's high school teacher of the year for 2015-16.

"It caught me by surprise when I got nominated and was chosen," Kuntz said. "It was a lot more humbling than I expected it to be, I really appreciated it. I don't think any teacher goes out looking for awards. We do what we do each day because it's kind of a calling."

BethAnn Donnenwerth from Wyandot Middle School was selected as the middle school teacher of the year, and Laura Ferrans of Cherokee Elementary School was named the district's elementary school teacher of the year.

While discussing his career at Dakota, Kuntz said he began teaching as the first full class of Dakota students entered the school, which had an enrollment of around 1,000 kids at the time. There were just 30 teachers in the building in 1997-98, and currently there are 133.

Although he wasn't part of opening the school, Kuntz said being a part of the growth of the building gave him several unique opportunities.

"The group here was very innovative, there was a very nurturing environment," Kuntz said. "There was never any boredom. There was never any chance to sit down and take a breath to say 'we're good,' because along with the mass growth we had in the building, the math curriculum changed with the state two or three times."

In his first four years at Dakota, Kuntz said he taught every math class which the school offered. Outside of the classroom, he was a member of the curriculum council while also being a union representative.

“When I came here with all of the growth, there was something different every day, and I still feel that way,” Kuntz said.

Kuntz took over the position of math department chair at Dakota five years ago, and he said that position has been a great addition for the second half of his teaching career.

While reflecting on what keeps him motivated to continue teaching, Kuntz said his enthusiasm and excitement for daily teaching lessons has yet to waver.

“The minute I’m not that excited, I probably won’t do this anymore,” Kuntz said.

Similar to Kuntz, Ferrans’ teaching career in Chippewa Valley schools has largely coincided with the growth of one particular building.

Ferrans has spent the last 20 years of her 32-year career in Chippewa schools at Cherokee Elementary, which she helped open.

“I feel very honored to represent not only the teachers at Cherokee, but across the district,” Ferrans said. “There have been so many people who have taught at Cherokee, we’ve really evolved as a group. We really work closely together like a family.”

Yet despite her time at Cherokee, Ferrans said she still refers to Miami Elementary as her “home” because she student-taught there, and spent a majority of time teaching there prior to Cherokee.

Ferrans currently teaches second grade, where her students consider her to be “really good at math,” according to a nomination form for teacher of the year candidates.

“As a child, math was one of my weaknesses as a student. I think because of that, I try very hard to make math accessible to all of the kids, because I remember that feeling of being frustrated,” Ferrans said.

In other areas outside of teaching, Ferrans has served as the School Improvement Chair for eight years, and she is the president of the Michigan Association of Teacher Educators.

At Wyandot Middle School, Donnenwerth has been an integral member of the team’s math department for 13 years.

Currently, she teaches regular math courses and accelerated math for seventh-graders.

“I think teaching accelerated math makes things different because the kids are very driven,” Donnenwerth said. “They want to learn more, they’re hungry to go deeper into the math curriculum. I can do more projects and more hands-on activities with them than I could do with some of my regular classes.”

Donnenwerth called the recognition a humbling surprise.

“I was really surprised. I don’t feel like I do anything that different from my peers and co-workers,” Donnenwerth said.