

2019 Teacher of the Year:

Susan Douglas, Almira School District

Susan Douglas did not drive a traditional route to the classroom. At Washington State University, she majored in criminal justice. In her first job out of school, she was a police officer in Hendersonville, TN, near Nashville.

More than a decade passed before she returned home to Washington. By now, she had a master's degree from the University of Tennessee and an expansive resume that included work in legal services, mental health and legislative affairs.



Susan Douglas

But how do you apply those experiences when you marry a farmer and move to Almira, WA? For Douglas, you start by volunteering in the local school.

It was a transformative experience in which Douglas found her true calling. She didn't belong in a police car or legislative office, but in a classroom.

Her volunteer work led to a part-time job in special education that eventually led to more schooling at Gonzaga University and Seattle Pacific University and a full-time job at Almira, where she is now an elementary math and science specialist and special education coordinator.

For someone who did not officially begin her teaching career until the age of 40, a late start did not hinder her progress. If anything, it only super-charged her innovation, creativity and enthusiasm.

While she may teach in one of the area's smallest rural districts, she has earned a reputation as one region's most respected educators. In July, that respect was formally recognized when judges named her NEWESD 101's 2019 Teacher of the Year. With that honor comes automatic nomination for the state Teacher of the Year award.

The Douglas difference begins with what her colleagues call "passion projects" designed to make math and science relevant to the world.

Her real-world studies are practically endless ... Geographic Information Systems (GIS) mapping, robotics, air quality studies, trout in the classroom and, of course, the district's

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blockbuster Ag STEM Day in which students examine the careers, economics and science of growing, marketing and selling crops. Her emphasis on developing relationships between students and community are instrumental in student success.

She effectively brings the world to the classroom, showing students the many ways they can become difference makers. “Education and experience empower our students and it is important to provide rich and authentic access to both,” she says. “Students want to be relevant in their families, their classroom and their community.”

For Douglas, her own ability to make a difference lies, in part, on her relentless quest to remain a student herself. Her summers, when not helping on the family farm, are often spent in classes and workshops. Most recently, she conducted research at an active paleontological field site in Montana.

Having been a NEWESD 101 Math and Science Fellow, Douglas believes she has a professional responsibility to constantly seek new ideas and better practices.

Douglas’ interest in students does not end when her classes end, says Almira Superintendent Shauna Schmerer. “She is a servant leader for her community, profession and students. She continually inspires students and peers to try harder and be better.”

It is an inspiration that produces results.

“Students regularly tell me the difference Susan has made in their lives,” says Almira Associate Administrator Anna Thomas. “Whether it is allowing students to research a passion project, or spending time after school to tutor a child, the common message I receive from students is, ‘Mrs. Douglas believes in me and listens to me.’ To Susan, being an educator is a way of life.”

Call her an amazing teacher. Call her a servant leader. Those are just two of the ways to describe the 2019 Teacher of the Year.



Story posted: July 31, 2018

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