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Tammy Kapp, December teacher of the month honored by the Liberal Chamber of Commerce, pauses at the end of her day teaching first-grade students at Southlawn Elementary. Kapp has worked for the district for 17 years. L&T photo/Rachel Coleman

‘They’re awesome,’ says Tammy Kapp

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

When Tammy Kapp graduated high school in Pampa, Texas, she thought she knew how to use the college education she planned to obtain. She’d be a secretary.

“After the first year of that, and the thought of working at a bank or an oil company, I realized, ‘No,’” Kapp recalled. “I couldn’t see myself doing that day after day.”

What captured her imagination was what she'd seen when she visited an aunt who taught school.

"She was a teacher in Tishomingo, Okla., and whenever we went to visit her, we'd end up spending time with her at the school," Kapp said. "I liked how she prepared her classroom, put up the bulletin boards. It seemed like so much fun to be a teacher."

Kapp, who hoped to get married and have a family, also thought the schedule of schoolteacher would suit her aspirations.

"I knew, 'I want to be a mom,'" she said. "It sounded great to be able to spend summers and holidays with my kids."

Then there were the aptitude tests.

"It seemed like every test always listed 'teacher' as something I'd be good at," Kapp said.

Two states north and seventeen years later, it's clear that the Kapp's instincts — and the vocational tests — were correct. Just as she hoped, Kapp married. She and her husband have two children. When summertime and school holidays roll around, they're together.

And, as 2013 rolled to a close, Kapp was honored by the Liberal Area Chamber of Commerce as the December Teacher of the Month. During the presentation at the USD 480 board of education meeting, Kapp's principal Gloria Quattrone praised her steady work ethic, her enthusiasm and her willingness to try new things.

When Kapp arrived at Southlawn, she'd completed her two-year degree at Seward County Community College, then continued with distance-learning classes offered through Fort Hays

State University.

“That was so long ago, we used a kind of speaker set-up in the outreach classrooms at the Epworth building,” she said. “You’d sit there and listen to a teacher, and when it was time to ask a question, you leaned over and pressed a button.”

By the time Kapp completed her teaching degree, the system had upgraded to include video transmission. The contrast with today’s technology is startling: Kapp uses a variety of high-tech learning aids in her classroom, from a whiteboard and touch-sensitive screens to iPads and laptops available to even the youngest students. The transitions slowly accumulated from her early days, when she worked with veteran teachers Barb Moore, Linda Lewis and Amy Butler. After Kapp’s student-teaching — also conducted at Southlawn — she was hired as a teacher, and she taught second-grade classes for 10 years.

“They taught me so much about how to be a teacher, and then when we had to switch to computer-based grading, I was able to help them,” she said. “A lot of our more experienced teachers were scared to death of the computers. I would tell them, ‘You’re not going to hurt it if you make a mistake.’”

These days, though, Kapp often turns to her own students when another technology upgrade threatens to overwhelm her.

“They love it and they know exactly what they’re doing,” she said. “I don’t always adjust to change easily.”

Nonetheless, after 12 years in the second-grade classroom, Kapp moved to ESL (English as a Second Language) instruction, which she performed for four years. For the 2013-14 school year, she moved back into her own classroom, this time with first-grade students.

“I missed having ‘my own’ kids,” she said, reflecting on the jam-packed four years she spent as an ESL instructor. “I was working with 300 children in all these different classrooms and I liked that, and I liked them, but I missed having a room and a group of my own.”

These days, Kapp teaches brand-new elementary students how to read, how to perform basic math operations, and how to keep moving when it's time to line up or switch tasks. She never thought she'd choose to work with such young students, she said.

"I thought they were just ... too little," she said with a laugh. "I thought they'd cry, I guess."

What she found was that first-grade students are "so funny, so innocent, so honest. They're awesome."

Even so, their inexperience often slowed down the day's routine. Kapp started playing "oldies" on her iPod to signal that it was time to transition from one area or activity to the next.

"And I'd sing along with the music," she said. "One day, I noticed a couple of them were holding their hands over their ears. I asked them, 'What's wrong? Do you not like the song?' They told me, 'We like the song, Mrs. Kapp. We just don't like your singing.'"

Kapp shook her head.

"First graders. They'll tell you exactly what they're thinking."

EDITOR'S NOTE — This profile is one of an ongoing series that profiles the teachers honored with a monthly award from the Liberal Chamber of Commerce. Look for a profile of November's award-winner, as well as the recently-announced Teacher of the Month for January in upcoming editions.

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