

I Love My
Librarian!
2009 Award

Nomination for Carolyn Wheeler

Media Specialist
Conant Elementary School
Bloomfield Hills, Michigan

Rochester Hills Public Library
Youth Services Librarian
Rochester, Michigan

Nominator:
Maureen Zack
Bloomfield Hills, Michigan

1. How long have you known the nominee and how did you come to know him or her?

The staff of Conant Elementary School collaborated on this nomination, for Carolyn Wheeler has continuously and faithfully assisted, mentored, impacted on, trained, and served every one of us and our students during the 16 years she has been our knowledgeable librarian, trustworthy colleague, frequent savior, and steadfast friend.

2. How has the nominee helped you and/or students at school? For example, did the nominee help you with a project, recommend resources or collaborate with you to enhance student learning?

Conant Elementary School is an International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme school, and Carolyn is, without equal, the curriculum guru. She keeps abreast of all the Michigan grade level content expectations for every subject, and chairs monthly, grade level meetings with teachers to determine their needs for information and materials. She always manages to fulfill, or supersede, their requirements. She also offers a “teacher study hall” at which she assists interested classroom teachers with the development of their programs of inquiries. Carolyn knows her media collection thoroughly, and she knows her building staff and their preferences, and these are her guidelines as she continues to seek additional motivating material to support and augment instruction. She will frequently, of her own volition, drop a helpful printout on a

teacher's desk or email a pertinent website URL. She sends special buckets filled with appealing books to the preschool and lower elementary classes and updates them frequently, always in tune to the topics they are studying. She also familiarizes herself with students' preferences, interests, and capabilities, and is quick to stop students in the corridor to inform them of a volume she has put aside for their pleasure, or to very quietly take a book to a child who is a reluctant reader and whisper, "I wanted you to be the first one to read this brand new book." With a note, or a gesture, or a whisper, and always with a smile, Carolyn possesses the rare skill of making all her "customers" feel very special.

3. How has the library, and the nominee in particular, had an impact on students and the learning process?

Carolyn's educational background: an associate's degree in dietetics, a Bachelor of Science in family resources and consumer science with a minor in social sciences, vocational education certification, a Master's degree in Library Science, and Technology Education certification from Michigan State University, is indicative of her love of learning and the role model she provides for young students. They know that she is the resident expert in tracking down information, as she directs them gently and willingly through library skills, independent research, and related topics to explore. Ms. Wheeler, in her own typical, quiet way, introduces students to the excitement and joy of discovery as she leads them through the intricacies of using the technological tools housed throughout the Media Center, and enables them to reach a wealth of global resources.

Because of the variety of media available, the former library is known as the Media Center, and because of Carolyn, the Media Center is the living nucleus of the school. It is always appropriately decorated for the season. Staff parties and celebrations are held there. Programs, book fairs, art and science exhibits, and community meetings take place there. Carolyn reaches out and brings the real world into our building, and into the lives of students and staff members. Several times during each school year she will invite authors, musicians, judges, artists, storytellers, local and state government officials, and whomever else she feels can contribute to education, to make a guest appearance in the Media Center, and to share their knowledge, skills, and experiences with the staff and students.

These are not just randomly selected presenters. Primarily, their topics must complement and enhance curriculum. Of equal importance is that the speakers are child-friendly. Carolyn carefully researches a prospective guest's background and reports of previous presentations, and, on her own time, attends presentations and book signings to observe an author's attitude and interaction with children. If the potential presenter ignores children or demonstrates a loss of patience, his or her name is scratched from the list.

Carolyn prepares a curriculum plan for classroom teachers in advance of a program, outlining the ties to curriculum at grade levels and the connections to the International Baccalaureate goals, as well as containing suggestions for pre-visit preparatory reading and/or activities. The youngsters are prepared for the guests, and their excited anticipation enriches the many and varied experiences.

Favorites among the many programs in the past several years included: Hockey Town Hero presented by Shelley Lazarus, Michigan author; Click, Clack, Moo and Giggle, Giggle Quack presented by Doreen Cronin, author and Betsy Lewin, illustrator; Willie Horton: Detroit's Own Willie the Wonder presented by Willie Horton himself, of the 1968 World Series Champion Detroit Tigers team; The Firefly presented by Puppet-Art puppeteers; In the Palm of Your Hand technology workshop presented by Tony Vincent; Stranger in the Woods presented by Laura and Robert Sams, Michigan songwriters; Women's' History Alive! presented by Sandra Hansen, storyteller; Alone Across the Arctic: One Woman Dog Team presented by Pam Flowers, author and adventurer of Iditarod fame, accompanied by her lead dog (and did the kids love that experience!!); Introducing Mr. Etch-A-Sketch presented by Tim George, illustrator; I Have a Little Shadow: A Child's Garden of Songs, Inspired by the poems of Robert Louis Stevenson presented by Steve and Caitlin M.G. Kalper; Making Math Meaningful presented by Greg Tang, author; Michigan Cyber Safety Initiative provided by Michigan State Attorney General's office; Gardening by the Book: Utilizing Children's Literature to Create Gardens presented by Jane L. Taylor, Michigan master gardener; and Gun Lake Adventures presented by Johnny Tuitel, Michigan author. The lattermost program, featuring a protagonist who suffers from cerebral palsy, was chosen to support Disabilities Awareness, and at least one such program is included every year.

In addition, through the magic of technology, the communication extends beyond borders. Currently, thanks to a link Carolyn set up with a Fulbright scholar studying in England, students are able to augment their European studies by reading her daily blog and submitting questions to her.

4. How does the nominee make the school a better place? Please be specific.

This wonderful teacher and leader not only makes the school a better place by her establishment and maintenance of a warm, comfortable, communal area in which all are equally welcome, but she strives to make the world a better place by consistently role modeling for colleagues and generations of students, the virtues of non-judgmental behavior, tolerance, and responsibility. There are several classes of deaf and hard of hearing students at Conant, from pre-school through fourth grade. Carolyn makes certain that they have equal access to all her services and has made some changes to the library collections to accommodate them, and to encourage hearing students to learn to

communicate with them, just as she has always done for those children who are limited English speaking.

Carolyn has a very strong commitment to community service. She teaches evening classes for women at local community centers (at no charge) and coordinates other classes as well. She works with a local homeless shelter. Whenever appropriate, she offers the opportunities to participate in service to others to students, their families, and school staff. At major holiday times, they are reminded of those less fortunate, and they are aware of their responsibility to accept and help others.

Early this year, Carolyn led a group of volunteers in organizing, planning, funding, and preparing a hot meal and ensuring a place to sleep for the night for many homeless families. First graders designed napkins and place cards, second graders designed the place mats, and in one way or another, all classes contributed. Not only did they provide a full dinner at the church that agreed to house the families, but they also had enough food to package lunches for them for the following day. This was a relevant, first-hand learning experience for the adults and the children who contributed, reinforced by reading the summary of grateful and moving remarks on the evaluation sheets shared with the group by the sheltering organization. This was far more effective teaching than any story that could be read to kids!

5. How has the individual demonstrated leadership in the school community or the profession?

Due to her seniority in the school district, coupled with her generous nature, Carolyn is regarded as a mentor by the other media specialists. They have, over the years, melded into a close, mutually supportive, cohesive team, working together to locate materials, seek solutions, share best practices, and stay aware of innovations and dream worthy opportunities to better serve their colleagues, communities, and students.

For the past several years, continuing, inevitable annual budgets cuts due to declining enrollment and static State funding severely compromised the Media Specialists' abilities to purchase sufficient current and timely print media for instruction. Confronted with tightened purse strings once again, they agreed a long-term solution was essential! Brain storming, followed by individual research of several viable options, led them to the development of a plan to utilize interactive technology to access and present up-to-the-minute, relevant, and interesting information in a manner that would actively involve K-12 students of today's collaborative, technology-savvy, Web 2.0 generation. Following a successful pilot project with Promethean ActivBoards, Media Specialists recognized the potential of this tool for providing a plethora of resources in a format ideal for classroom teaching. They felt the initiative would

also slash future costs of annual supplies, while avoiding duplication of materials, cataloguing, storage, and disposal of quickly outdated print material. Additionally, the project exemplified the goal of preparing students for the future by modeling appropriate and effective use of cutting-edge technology.

So convincingly did Carolyn and her cohorts compile facts and figures and compelling substantiation for transforming classrooms, that Administration and the School Board agreed to equip every K-12 classroom with the ActivBoards and peripherals to provide a portal to learning and worldwide media access in a way that is interactive, stimulating, and inspiring for students and teachers alike. This was the first K-12 installation in the United States. Carolyn, and some of the other Media Specialists, willingly gave up days during their summer vacation time to participate in in-service training, including extensive planning on where and how the existing instructional curriculum could be enhanced by use of the new technology. Carolyn served as trainer, guide, and trouble-shooter for the staff members in her school. Her energy and enthusiastic, wholehearted support resulted in a first-of-its-kind program that has had an absolutely amazing impact on sustaining students' attention in classes; furthermore, it has rejuvenated the enthusiasm of teachers to provide high quality instruction in their classrooms. Carolyn Wheeler was the first name on the list of honorees when the Michigan Association for Media in Education "School Library Media Program of the Year" award was conferred upon the District for this endeavor.

Carolyn maintains extensive involvement in professional organizations and community activities. She holds active membership in the Texas Library Association, and the Michigan Library Association, The American Library Association, the American Association of School Librarians, Michigan Association for Media in Education, Michigan Association for Computer Users in Learning, and the Society of Delta Kappa Gamma International. She has held multiple offices in most of the organizations, serves on a multitude of committees, and, not surprisingly given her work ethic, has been recognized with myriad awards. She counts these accomplishments among her career highlights, along with her Advisory Board position for Thomson Gale Publishers, her time spent as a consultant for the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe of Michigan, and her work with the Japanese Young Teachers Abroad Program.

We received a wealth of comments from staff members, students, and their parents when we invited them to contribute to the nomination. There were far too many to include; however, a few from students were too true to omit.

"Thank you for always making sure I had the book I wanted. Thank you for keeping our bucket filled. Thank you for all the programs. Thank you for everything."

“Thank you for teaching me to read. I will always love reading and think of you.”

“Thank you, Ms Wheeler, for taking time to teach me the Dewey Decimal System when I asked you. Now I’ll always know where the books are.”

“Ms. Wheeler does a lot of thing for us. She is the best librarian in the whole world ever!”

One colleague summed it up so well:

“I want to take this perfect moment to celebrate the ‘glue’ who holds us together all year, but especially at this beginning of the year when we seem to have so many extra technology issues. Thank you Carolyn, from all the people who rely on you to put our ‘pieces’ back together so we can work as a ‘whole’ staff during the year!”

It was not easy to amass this information regarding our Media Specialist’s accomplishments, for Carolyn does not seek the spotlight. “I” is not a prominent word in her vocabulary. This very soft spoken, caring woman possesses exceptional skills in evaluating situations, and instinctively employing effective proactive behavior to avoid potential problems, while expertly teaching our kids and unfailingly meeting our needs. Day after day, she calmly and quietly creates an atmosphere conducive to exemplary education and consideration for others. Is it any wonder that we love our librarian?