

STUDENT IMPACT

The mother of two had a plan. She would bring her younger son to the elementary school in her neighborhood, drop him off for his second day of kindergarten, and still have just enough time to make a meeting in Denver. The hitch? When the bell sounded the boy climbed to the top of the playground's monkey bars and refused to come down. Sobbing, he insisted that he was NOT going to kindergarten that day. Just 45 minutes from the start of her meeting, the mother felt helpless. And hopeless.

Hope appeared in the form of an earnest sixty-something woman who emerged from the side door of the school. The badge hanging from the ribbon looped around her neck identified her as a BVSD employee. She offered to help. "She had this air of confidence and nurturing," the mother recalled. "I remember feeling that I could trust this woman with my son." Hurrying to her car, she looked over her shoulder and saw the employee, who is being nominated by our school's Parent Teacher Organization, peering up at a five-year-old.

At a glance, the nominee does not fit the mold for an Impact Award. Rescuing a child from a play structure is hardly the stuff of educational greatness. A daily routine that includes filing forms, answering calls, and making copies would be an unlikely onramp to the pantheon of inspirational teachers and motivational principals. But to focus on work that many would find mundane and a less than glamorous title – Secretary – is to see only the trees.

The forest is what matters.

Judy has worked at our school for 30 or so years. Tack on time as a parent of three children and she has been walking the two blocks from her home to the building for 35 years. Her tenure had spanned scores of teachers and seven principals. On her watch thousands of girls and boys have taken tentative steps into kindergarten and confident strides toward middle school. Test scores have soared. So has the satisfaction of students, parents and educators with the school's defining feature, its oversized sense of community and caring.

Judy is not one to claim credit for success. Others are more effusive. The school's current principal said, "Anyone who steps into [our school] gets a feeling, a sense of that this place is friendly, open and warm. It is in the air, bigger than any one person. But there is nobody who personifies that spirit, who radiates that feeling, more than Judy.

A visit to her desk provides insight to her impact. Seated behind giant yellow letters that spell "WELCOME," she can look through the opening above an elongated counter and see the intersection of the school's two main hallways. Air traffic controller is the image that springs to mind. Even when her head is buried in piles of paper, Judy's senses never stop sweeping the area crossed several times per day by each of the school's nearly 400 children.

Dozens of kids stop into the office. Before the bell a selected student arrives to turn the page on Judy's desk calendar. A handful of kids arrive to read the day's announcements. Judy rehearses the group, coaxing the shyer sorts to speak loud and clear when microphone goes live. Before long, the first of a string of skinned knees and scraped elbows. Bruised feelings add to the stream of tears. Requests to pull a wiggly tooth are common. So are pit stops for nothing more than a few kind words or a sympathetic smile.

Each comfort is small. Speaking in tones that blend June Cleaver's sweetness with Walter Cronkite's steadiness, Judy informs, assures and, when necessary, scolds. How to measure the impact of each parcel of compassion? There is no metric. More unfathomable is the sum of the kindnesses dispensed so freely hour after hour, day after day, week after week. Multiply by 30 and the accumulation would resemble an Everest of caring.

Madness for a woman with no shortage of work? Method guides this willingness to put people before paper. "Sometimes a child needs more attention or more quiet than a teacher can offer," said Judy. "Kids need a place to regroup. So we make the office available as a place where you can come for comfort, where kids feel that there are adults they can talk to. We try to make the office a safe haven."

The value of the safe haven is not lost on parents. One mother said, "My son has ADD. The fact that he can stop by the office helps him get through the day." Another parent said this: "Knowing that she is in the building makes me feel that there is someone who will care for my kids. That gives me tremendous peace of mind."

Peace of mind was top priority for the mother who left her child atop the monkey bars. She called the school the moment her meeting ended. Did she need to return to school? "No," said Judy, who had coaxed the boy down to earth and guided him to the office. She busied him with paper to shred. Before long, when the boy seemed steady, she guided him to his classroom, where she stayed until he looked comfortable with his teacher and his peers. After five years and not another insecure moment from her son, the mother said, "Judy made my son feel safe."

SCHOOL IMPACT

A teacher who has taught at our school for 20 years struggled to explain the impact Judy has on our school. Unable to find the words in English, she taps another language. “Japanese have a word, ‘unami,’ she explained. “It describes the essence of what makes a dish distinctive. If it is not there you do not notice the absence. But with ‘unami’ you sense something special.”

Any attempt to deconstruct the special feeling at our school, to examine its components, starts at the front office. Seated near the center, Judy exudes a distinctive style. At her desk, in plain view, she looks to be completely accessible. The appearance is not deceptive. “I cannot count the number of times Judy has stopped whatever she was doing, literally dropped everything, to answer a question or help me with a project,” said a parent who has known her for six years. “It seems that she is always available.”

The perception is on point. “There is no need for a parent to be upset or anxious because they cannot get in touch with the school, with their children,” said Judy. “They should feel that they can call. Or stop by. We are here to take care of people.”

The impact of openness extends to classroom, said a parent who teaches a nearby elementary school. “Research shows that when parents are involved in a school the kids do better. By helping to make the school so open to parents, by making it easy for them to volunteer, she is giving the kids a big boost.”

“BVSD is full of people who are professional, who are very good at their jobs. But she is unique,” said the previous principal. “Her example and her leadership inspire people. She makes everyone around her better.”

A teacher elaborated: “She is smart and opinionated without being judgmental. What that means is that I can go to her, ask any question, and know that I will get an honest, immediate answer. Having that resource just down the hallway makes a big difference.”

Another teacher marvels at the patience of Judy during his first months at our school. “It did not take me long to see that she could answer any question I had. I used to make lists of them, one question after another, and then go to her for answers. If she did not have the answer – that was rare – she knew how to get the answer. I have yet to ask for something that she could not do.”

The can-do attitude reaches right to the top of the school. “When I started four years ago [Judy] did not sit me down for a lecture. She let me have my own experience, let me learn people by myself. When I had questions she coached me. She helps me make decisions without telling me what to do.”

The principal links the proximity of a trusted adviser, a sounding board, to the success of the school. He feels certain that she provides something that often eludes schools –

continuity. “Teachers, principals, and programs come and go,” he said. “We are all expendable at this school. With one exception. Judy is not expendable. She is the secret to our success.”

Our “Unami,” if you will.

STORIES

There is one sure way to fail at our school. Forgot the words to the school song? That's okay. Miss the last call for the bus? It happens. No, the only way to be wrong time and again is to try to limit Judy to a single label.

The previous principal paused when asked to define the unassuming grandmother. "Jack-of-all-trades" was his first attempt: "When we were having problems with the cleaning staff she came in every weekend and cleaned the place. One summer she and her husband came in to install tiles that students had painted to mark the retirement of three staff members. His second thought was "mentor": "As a new principal I could not have asked for a better mentor." The principal settled on a third label: "I had some personal adversity during my time at the school. My son died in an accident. She was supportive and loving. A great friend."

"Pied Piper" is a label that many would deem apt. A kindergarten teacher from a different BVSD school recalled touring the school before making her Open Enrollment choice. "The first person I met was Judy. Her warmth drew me into the school, made me want to be here, made me feel that this was a place where my kids would be happy." Other parents tell similar tales of comparing their reception to more officious encounters at other elementary schools. One teacher who has taught at our school for nearly 20 years knows of dozens of families who trace their decision to "open enroll" to warm welcome and effusive information provided by Judy.

Teachers are not immune to her lure. She urged a former parent who had completed teacher training to apply for an opening for a job she has now held for four years. Two other current teachers recall confusion when they arrived for interview. Both expected the distance inherent to the job application process. Both encountered the opposite: "She treated me like I had worked there for years."

When the current principal came for his own interview, the tour and history provided by Judy made the buildings maze of open classrooms feel manageable, even cozy. "She has a gift for making this place feel like home," he said.

But one label that sticks better than others.

Every week several children make their way to the office to discuss dental issues. Some arrive carrying a baby tooth, which she places in a plastic treasure chest hanging from a necklace. Teeth that are not yet out get a close inspection from a woman with three decades of experience. Those that are "not ready" are sent back to class for further wiggling. And the rest? Practice – an average of a dozen extractions per month times nine months over the course of 30 years gives a tally of roughly 3,000 – has allowed her to perfect the gentle tug that liberates tooth from gum.

“I did not pull any of my children’s teeth,” laughs the parent-turned-teacher, whose three kids are now in their twenties. “Every one of them was by her.”

A former PTO president recalled an evening when her daughter’s loose tooth was hanging by the thinnest of threads. The mother offered to tug the tooth. No dice. “Do NOT touch it!” shrieked the daughter. “My daughter trusted Judy more than her own mother,” mused the former PTO president. “She is the Tooth Fairy.”