

Teachers shape the next generation 'It just doesn't get any better than this'

Cheryl Zigrang '89 said she's always wanted to be a teacher, and now, as a principal, she's experiencing a new dimension in shaping the lives of children.

"I love to see so many children and love watching them be successful," said Zigrang, principal of Thoroughgood Elementary School in Virginia Beach.

"The kids who are here now in fifth grade, I've known and watched since they were in kindergarten. It just doesn't get any better than this."

From classrooms to the guidance office to administration, educational facilities across the eastern United States and beyond benefit from Virginia Wesleyan graduates. College records list 739 alumni in the field of education, with 519 as teachers.

The college enjoys a stellar reputation among educators for producing outstanding teachers.

"As an administrator, when I get a Virginia Wesleyan student, I'm always confident that they'll be ready and prepared with the right background. I have several teachers on my staff from Wesleyan," said Zigrang,

Zigrang began her own teaching career at Point O' View Elementary, also in Virginia Beach, where she taught first grade for nine years. She also logged teaching time at the city's Old Donation Center for Gifted and Talented before moving on to Thoroughgood.

Now in her third year of teaching, Erin Kanaly '01 has already earned a coveted distinction. Last year, she was voted Teacher of the Year at Coleman Place Elementary School in Norfolk – the first teacher at this school to earn such an honor so early in a teaching career

"My first year was very rough. The kids really tested me, and I wanted them to like me and wanted everything to be perfect. Then I was reminded that I was not there to be a friend," Kanaly said. "I'm not a quitter, so I had to fix what I was doing."

She must have done something right because toward the end of the school year, some of her students – "big tough guys" – who had previously given her a hard time suddenly wanted to be with her all the time. Kanaly said she set up a special email account so her students could keep in touch with her over the summer.

Kanaly did not attend Wesleyan immediately after high school. "I was an adult student with an associate's degree when I went to Wesleyan," Kanaly said.

"People there made it easy for me. Somebody was always available to help and I never felt uncomfortable. There's no age barrier among students. We all helped each other."

Another award-winning alumna is Debbie Field, '89, a fourth grade teacher at New Castle Elementary in Virginia Beach. Field was selected as Virginia Beach's citywide reading teacher of the year last year and also won the statewide honor of the Ofie T. Rubin Reading Teacher of the Year

“As a fourth grade teacher I teach all subjects, but my favorite subject to teach is reading,” she said while she talked about a new reading club program that she developed and received approval to start at her school.

Field, who vividly recalls receiving a toy school bus as an early birthday present, said she’s always known she would become a teacher. “Kids bring excitement with them all the time, and it’s contagious.”

One mantra that Field said has prepared her the most is, “We’re here for the children, not what’s easiest for us.”

For Patty ’73 and John Laycock ’72, teaching runs in the family. The two met at Wesleyan and married shortly after Patty graduated. John was already teaching in Loudon County Public Schools, and Patty taught third grade for several years.

In 30 years of teaching, Patty has had a variety of experiences, including opening a pre-school, teaching at-risk four-year-olds, teaching kindergarten and also serving as a middle school resource teacher. In between, the former Wesleyan cheerleader also found time to teach gymnastics.

Patty is part of Wesleyan’s first three-generation family. In 1984, her mother, Margaret Gills of Virginia Beach, graduated with a degree in music. And most recently, her daughter Mickey graduated with a major in psychology and a teaching certificate. Just as her mother did, Mickey has started her career teaching third grade in Loudon County schools.

Her husband began his career as a history teacher, and then went on for a master’s degree in counseling. He left education to pursue a career in insurance for 15 years, but then re-entered the field.

“He missed the kids and missed the schools, so he went back and got re-certified. He’s been a middle school guidance counselor for five years. He’s so good with that age group and knows just what to do,” Patty said.

Many teachers have moved on to successful careers in education administration. One of them is Dr. Theresa Mizelle, director of staff development/assistant to the superintendent for Chesapeake Public Schools.

Now in her fourth year in this capacity, Mizelle has spent the entire 26 years of her career with Chesapeake. She taught English at Deep Creek High School for 13 years before moving to administration.

“The small classrooms (at Wesleyan) created a real family atmosphere, and I see that same sense of family at Chesapeake Public Schools, which can be attributed to the leadership at both organizations.”

Mike Evans ’81, principal of Denbigh High School in Newport News, has been a teacher, assistant principal and coach. His job now is to be a resource and support person for the teachers. “If you don’t feed the teachers, they’ll eat the students,” he said, emphasizing how critical his role is as an administrator.

He said his “paycheck” is in the form of students coming back and telling him he made a difference in their lives.

“That beats making a lot of money,” he said. “You don’t have to pay taxes on that kind of income.”

