

TEACHER FEATURE

Collaboration brings learning alive

By JOANNE STUART

My formal training was in education. While attending Lesley College in Cambridge, Mass., in pursuit of my master's of education degree, I taught at the Buckingham, Browne and Nichols School.

My master's completed, I went on to teach and live in the dorms at a day and boarding school, the Fay School, in Southborough, Mass., for the next five years.

When I turned 30, I decided to try my hand at business, left teaching and began a career in training and development at a database-marketing firm in Burlington, Mass. My career drew me into other aspects of human resources and I eventually landed in Maine working for 11 years as human resources director of a crude-oil pipeline company based in South Portland.

I married in 1997, and soon my husband and I settled on Long Island in Casco Bay. My husband is a lobsterman, scallop dragger and marine consultant. I commute to work daily on the ferry as my husband sets out to fish.

In 2000, I felt I had met my goal in the business arena. My search for my next professional challenge led me back to my beginnings and my love of teaching.

I believed my years in human resources would guide me in developing student expectations, even at an early age, that would later prove to be in line with the requirements of a quality work force. I would hold the bar high enough to stretch each student according to his or her unique abilities and learning style, but not so high as to miss the pleasure of small successes along the way.

I had come to realize my passion rested in the eyes of a young learner. We must instill a dedication to lifelong learning in all of our students. Teachers start by demonstrating a daily thirst for knowledge, welcoming our role and rediscovering the joy of being the tallest and oldest learner in the classroom.

After completing the certification process, I was fortunate to find my first job back in the classroom in my own back yard. A maternity leave at the Long Island School created an opportunity for me to teach seven energetic K-2 students for the 2000-01 school year. It was great to nurture and be nurtured at the same time as I struggled to get my feet wet again. Among my many pleasures at the Long Island School that year was sharing the joy of children learning to



Joanne Stuart's husband, Capt. John Stuart, is partnering with her class to teach them about lobster migration and fishing cycles.

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read, and then devouring book upon book and adapting "The Great Kapok Tree" by Lynne Cherry into a classroom play. The experience at the Long Island School taught me the value of collaboration and cooperation among students and teachers.

I was hired at Wentworth early in the summer of 2001. I was immediately overwhelmed by the size of the school (more than 800 students) and the need to ramp-up quickly in order to meet the district goals for the third-grade curriculum while aligning with the Maine State Learning Results. Scarborough provides opportunities each summer to attend workshops on curriculum, practices and process that would prove to be the foundation of my planning for the upcoming year. I participate in professional development workshops throughout the school year and completed a mini-grant project with two other teachers titled "From Wings to Whispers," an integrated curriculum study of the Scarborough Marsh.

Projects my first year included the creation of a 24-by-12-foot mural of the Big Friendly Giant and Sophie from "The BFG" by Roald Dahl,

which was displayed at Oak Hill Hannaford Bros. Students also experienced Colonial times when our classroom was transformed for a day into a schoolroom of that era.

This year, as part of our study of cycles, we have planted a garden of spring bulbs, sent monarch butterfly representations on a migratory journey to Mexico and are partnering with my husband, Captain Stuart, to learn about lobster migration and fishing cycles.

Students this year will complete a unit as part of the Adopt-a-Boat program, which was organized by fishermen, the MIT Sea Grant College Program, and associated organizations to use commercial fishing vessels to teach students about the complexities of marine life, marine ecology and the role of the commercial fishing industry in coastal communities. We have requested the use of an underwater remotely operated vehicle to film the habitat and behavior of lobsters as well as document the hauling of traps.

Through independent research, classroom and boat visits, videos, and e-mail discussions with Captain Stuart, we will study the effects of weather and seasons on catch, the economics and history of fishing, the use and importance of boat data and keeping a logbook, and the construction and operation of a seaworthy vessel.

We will follow him through his transition from lobstering to scalloping and readying for lobstering again in the spring. We will invite guest speakers on various marine-related

topics into the classroom, and a parent has volunteered to maintain our scrapbook. Our culminating activity will be a field trip to Long Island in May.

I am so proud to be a part of the Adopt-A-Boat program. I never expected to be able to work with my husband on this project, but that certainly has been a bonus. This program is in its second year and one lesson learned from its first year was the need for open and clear communication between the classroom teacher and the boat captain. That will be no problem for us as we can discuss next steps at the dinner table and he can be reminded of e-mails that need a response.

I have a fundamental belief that successful teaching is a collaborative effort among all parties involved with the growth and development of each child. To meet the individual learning needs of our students, we must rely on open communication between home and school and among the professional staff, including the classroom teacher, specialists and administrators.

I use the Maine State Learning Results and district curriculum goals as guideposts in my planning. I view my plans as setting out on a learning journey. My role is to man the helm and keep the class on course, ascertaining that each guidepost is reached.

However, how we get there is determined by the class. We may even veer off course for a time, but always to make a new investigation. I believe it is key to remain flexible and allow the students to take short excursions of discovery. This approach not only allows us to reach our goals and beyond, but to have fun along the way.

My expectation for students is to always take pride in their work, treating each effort as if it were their best. In addition, I expect everyone to respect and demonstrate tolerance for the ideas and accomplishments of others. We celebrate all successes in the classroom, even mine.

Lastly, I owe what successes I can claim in the classroom to the support of the administrators and the generosity of my fellow teachers at Wentworth, especially those who act as my mentors.