

Wednesday, February 4, 2009

State teaching award finalists boast of ties to OU

By Amanda Benjamin, student writer

There's little that fifth-grade teachers Suzanne O'Brien and Beverly Fanelli won't endure if it means their students are learning. In fact, decorating the hallway of Fox Elementary School in Macomb are paper cutouts depicting parts of the human body.

"We're all staring at intestines as we walk down the hallway," said Fanelli, who has been teaching with O'Brien for 11 years.

O'Brien, who attended professional development courses at OU, is a Michigan finalist for the Presidential Awards for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching (PAEMST), as is OU graduate Jon Aaron Phillips of Adams Elementary School in Waterford.

Fanelli, an OU alumna, won the award in 2004.

Phillips teaches a first- and second-grade class of 50 students at Adams Elementary School in Waterford. He graduated with a teaching certificate in 2000 after switching from a math major.

While Phillips was in the teaching program, he decided he didn't want to do it, but then came back. Bob Wiggins, associate dean of the School of Education and Human Services at OU, told Phillips that he could start where he left off.

"Giving them a second chance sometimes pays off," Wiggins said. "We want to take the students that we have and make them the best they can be."

Phillips said he got a lot of experience at OU. He had to do four different classroom observations before he could student teach. He also played baseball for the university and enjoyed working at baseball camps for kids.

O'Brien was already teaching and had her master's degree when she took professional development classes at OU. She said her experience was wonderful and extremely beneficial.

"Teacher Leadership in Math and Science" was one course she took with Professor Dyanne Tracy five years ago. The class is for people who've been teachers for more than five years and want to be leaders in their field.

O'Brien also co-lectured the class with Tracy a year and a half ago. Tracy said they complemented each other because her strengths are math first and science second, so O'Brien helped to represent the areas of science. For the class, they planned together and presented materials to teachers aspiring to higher levels of professionalism.

"(O'Brien) helped them see that they could achieve the same level of leadership," Tracy said.

O'Brien's experience at OU has remained both meaningful and relevant. She and Fanelli, who've team taught for eight years, regularly bounce ideas off each other.

"They are constantly evolving to keep their teaching fresh, exciting and effective," Tracy said.

Phillips, who received the Walther P. Chrysler Award for Closing the Technology Gap in Education last year, said his goals are to provide kids opportunities to be successful and to be a role model for his children and students.

Flexibility is important along with figuring out how to help students by adapting to their different learning styles, Phillips said.

"Everything you tell them is something new," he explained. "They are excited about learning."

O'Brien said she loves being with the kids and that they keep her on her toes. "I think I learn as much from them as they do from me," she said.

O'Brien said that although she did well when she was in school, it didn't really interest her. She wanted to teach for those kinds of kids. "Making the experience meaningful to their lives makes them interested."

Applying for PAEMST is a huge undertaking. According to Fanelli, applicants reflect on their teaching, videotape a lesson, watch the lesson 100 times to analyze it and go through six months of getting everything ready to submit.

"There are very few and far between teachers who are motivated and follow through. That's why they're exceptional," Tracy said.

"It gives you some validation of the work you do in the classroom," Phillips said about being a state finalist for the award.

O'Brien said the best things about it are being recognized for what she does every day and sharing the experience with people who have the same passion and desire for teaching.

"I have no desire to be a principal or to go on," she said. "This is where I belong."

SUMMARY

Suzanne O'Brien and Jon Aaron Phillips say the honor validates their work and allows them to share a positive experience with others passionate about teaching.

Created by David Groves (groves@oakland.edu) on Wednesday, February 4, 2009

Modified by David Groves (groves@oakland.edu) on Wednesday, February 4, 2009

Article Start Date: Wednesday, February 4, 2009