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Genoa City educator named Wisconsin Elementary School Teacher of the Year

Mary Ellen Kanthack to receive \$3,000 from Herb Kohl Educational Foundation

MADISON — In a surprise ceremony at her school, Mary Ellen Kanthack, a fifth-grade teacher in the Genoa City J2 School District, was named Wisconsin's 2018 Elementary School Teacher of the Year.

State Superintendent Tony Evers made the announcement during an all-school assembly at her school. As part of the Teacher of the Year honor, Kanthack will receive \$3,000 from the Herb Kohl Educational Foundation.

“Teaching is a career for optimists. People who see the potential in each student and meet challenges with innovative solutions that improve the lives and education of our kids,” Evers said. “A Teacher of the Year recipient inspires the young people in their school and their colleagues in the school and community. It is an honor to recognize educators who do so much for Wisconsin’s public schools.”

“The Teacher of the Year program highlights the many contributions educators make to our children, schools, and communities,” said Herb Kohl, philanthropist and businessman, who co-sponsors the Wisconsin Teacher of the Year program through his educational foundation. “Our teachers make extraordinary efforts to help all children achieve.”

“Mary Ellen epitomizes professionalism,” said Pam Larson, Brookwood Middle School principal in her nomination of Kanthack for a Kohl Foundation Teacher Fellowship. She has facilitated professional development sessions in the district and virtually with teachers from around the country. Kanthack was among 30 math teachers chosen as a BetterLesson Master Teacher in 2013-14. The following year she was among 65 science teachers chosen in a pool of 800 applicants. Through the Master Teacher Project, she has produced more than 200 standards-based math and science lessons that are available across the country. In the past year, she served on a National Education Association committee to study, research, and develop new professional development standards for teachers.

Kanthack embraces personalized learning in her classroom and is leading a personalized learning pilot in the district. Said to be personalizing instruction long before personalized learning was a movement, she sets goals for individual students and the whole class. A parent noted her ability to differentiate the learning needs of

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individual students, remarking on her son’s excitement about the lessons in Mrs. Kanthack’s classes. “My students know that I am always listening to their ideas, honoring ingenuity, inquiry, and creativity while I learn alongside them,” she said. She adds that she uses a balance of technology and hands-on learning to connect her students’ education to real life. “I believe in helping students to master standards by using multiple ways of teaching a concept and allowing students to engage in productive struggle throughout the learning process,” she said.

Kanthack initiated an elementary forensic speaking program and in 2009 began writing and directing musicals, collaborating with school staff and community members. The screen door prop from the original musical is used in every annual production. She started a student-led gardening program that promotes better nutrition in the school and the community. Her 9/11 Memorial Daffodil community beautification effort is integrated with themes of peace, tolerance, and remembrance, as well as lessons in social studies and science. On the 10th anniversary, the entire Genoa City community got involved, planting 2,996 bulbs for every life lost.

Her community collaboration includes volunteering for the Walworth County 4-H, as choir director for her church, and a musician for community events. She is a member of the Geneva Lakes YMCA and Master Swim Team, serves on the Board of Review for Genoa City government, and volunteers for community events such as “Trunk or Treat” and Genoa City Days.

Kanthack began her career as a fourth-grade teacher at Brookwood Elementary School in Genoa City and in 2009, she moved to Brookwood Middle School. She earned National Board Certification in 2011 as a generalist, middle childhood level. In 2015, she began teaching fifth-grade at the district’s fourth- through eighth-grade middle school. Kanthack is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Parkside with a bachelor’s degree in communication. She earned a Master of Arts in Teaching degree from Aurora University in Aurora, Ill.

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