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Beloved Almaden Country School principal Jean Delwiche retires

By Jeanne Carbone Lewis
Staff Writer

Jean Delwiche is a prime example of someone born to be a teacher.

As a young girl growing up in England, she taught imaginary friends, which helped relieve some of the loneliness of her difficult childhood. She pursued an education, becoming the first in her family to receive a college degree, and went on to teach in both England and the United States.

She has accumulated 36 years as an educator, the past nine as principal of Almaden Country School where she has inspired students as well as teachers to do their very best. Delwiche will retire at the end of this school year after 24 years at Almaden Country School.

“Every now and then we all do something truly brilliant,” said Almaden Country School founder Nan Hunter. “When I invited Jean Delwiche to join the faculty of Almaden Country School all other events seem to pale in light of this decision. She has been an influence for good at our school from the moment she arrived.”



Jean Delwiche's favorite thing about being principal is "the children!" Left: eighth graders Fiona Fisk and Maryann Schwartzkoff, third grader Nora Heindel, Delwiche, and second graders Marisa Silva, Maren Stubenvoll, Nikita Klimov and Morgan Goldstein. Photo by Jeanne Carbone Lewis

“Her greatness is magnified in the classrooms where she taught, in the office where she has counseled, loved, reasoned, and encouraged. I admire her personal integrity, the pureness of her character and her ability to face challenges with a firm and friendly reliability. She is a beloved co-worker and friend. She has left an imprint for good on the thousands of children who have been at Country School,” added Hunter.

Early years

Jean Healy grew up in Bury, an industrial town north of England where life was greatly affected by World War II. Food was rationed, mothers worked and fathers were missing but close friendships and good times were cherished.

Her parents were working-class; her father a bricklayer. Her brother and sister were older by almost a decade and the young girl created imaginary playmates, “Ebbie, Tubie and Scurbie,” to fill the sibling gap. She would amuse herself by teaching them reading, writing and drawing—even dressing them in make-believe school uniforms.

She’d play hospital curing the trio and her best doll “Annie” of many ills. They taught the young girl a great deal but most important the child’s play set the stage for a career—she would become either a nurse or a teacher. After starting school, Delwiche vividly remembers her “angel” teacher at St. Peter’s Primary school, Miss Bell.

“She looked exactly like Snow White with her dark curls and rosy cheeks,” said Delwiche, a petite, attractive woman with an easy smile and a slight English accent. “She opened the world for me by teaching me how to read. I remember the struggles of the girl sitting in the seat beside me who couldn’t master the words and I would ‘take over’ reading things for her. Reading became my lifelong friend.”

Despite difficult family circumstances, the 15-year-old convinced her octogenarian grandmother to allow Jean to remain in school and live with her. She worked hard, passed the examinations and entered nursing school. She married and became a mother to an energetic son and realized that her chosen career path might not be the best. The family moved to the south of England where she applied for college entrance as a “mature” student of 24. She was turned down and told to broaden her educational experience and reapply the next year. She took a position as a student intern teacher with Hertfordshire County and started her teaching career.

“From the moment I stepped into a classroom I never looked back,” said Delwiche. “Under the tutelage of three master teachers that year I learned more about children and teaching than I ever did in my ‘official’ training through college.”

The following year she entered the university for teacher training, taking double majors in science and education. One of her most memorable experiences was the afternoon she received her teaching certificate with its official seal of the Cambridge Institute of Education. The young woman taught in England and then moved to the United States teaching at a local school where she met Nan Hunter in 1978. Hunter’s dream was the Country School where the philosophy is based on the knowledge that each child has unique capabilities and those talents must be nurtured in addition to offering students a solid academic education. The two women shared the vision and Delwiche started teaching fourth grade in 1982 at Almaden Country School, becoming principal in 1988. The family had moved to Almaden the year before.

“Every child deserves a very personal experience in education,” said Almaden Country School Managing Director Steve Hayden. “Jean had the passion and vision to put this goal into practice, where she was able to inspire the teachers, make the parents to understand it and the children live up to it. She has a relentless commitment to this dream in a way that is very personal, loving, patient and humorous.”

When asked what her favorite thing about being principal is, Delwiche quickly answers with a huge smile: “the children!” She has vivid recollections of Thanksgiving feasts where the kids

cook the entire meal “except for the turkey” and dress in Indian and Pilgrim costumes. The pumpkin carving festival where she appears as her alter ego—Del Witch—complete with warts and green makeup is one of the highlights for the students. Each grade from first to eighth presents a play each school year with a poem written and read by their beloved principal so that even the younger audience will understand.

Accolades

“She really understands children, their development, their strengths and how to share with the parents,” said second grade teacher and parent Jennifer Griffith. “She has a gift.”

“She’s very good if you need another opinion on a child,” said second grade teacher and parent Molly Singer. “She’ll come in your room and talk to the child for 10 minutes and give you a whole list of things to do, ways to help that child. And it’s amazing how she knows all the kids and does a special thing for each one on their birthday. And she always does little things for us like that.”



A photograph of Jean Delwiche “in character” as “Del Witch” for Almaden Country School’s annual pumpkin carving night. Photo courtesy of Jean Delwiche

She has an incredible quiet competence about her and can calm a nervous parent and an upset child no matter what the age. She has the perspective that comes with experience and more than anything, she has a love of children and education. I will miss her terribly.”

And Delwiche has made a lasting impression on Almaden Country School students as well.

“I like when the principal dresses as the witch,” said second grader Morgan Goldstein. “It creeps me out but she is so much fun.”

“I like when she asks us to read out of our reader,” said second grader Nikita Klimov. “She listens to us.”

Sharon Wilkus has taught at Almaden Country School for 23 years.

“Jean has been a foundation for the school to keep it steady and growing stronger every year,” said Wilkus who teaches third through eighth grade art. “Her vision has carried through what Nan Hunter wanted to accomplish in creating the school. It has been like a palette in essence of creating the school like a work of art. The principal works with so many different facets to make a beautiful school.”

“I have known and worked with Jean for the past 24 years,” said administrative assistant Diane Blake. “She is a friend, a mentor and my boss.

Looking toward the future

Retirement offers a number of options for Delwiche. She has planned a trip to England to visit her brother and sister. She's also looking forward to having the braces removed that have made talking so cumbersome.

Delwiche and her husband Dave have three grown children—Paul, Molly [a fourth grade teacher] and Jeannine. Delwiche plans to spend time with her grandchildren, Sara, 4, Tyler, 3 and Trevor, 9. The other love of her life is her West Highland terrier, Bailie. She still plans to be active at Almaden Country School as a substitute and serving as principal emeritus on the board of trustees.

It is hard for her to leave the school she loves.

“Our big thing here is looking for the gift that every child has and then being able to show that off,” said Delwiche in a letter for the Almaden Country School newsletter. “That is really a special thing. Every child has a gift; you just have to find it. You must look beyond the surface to really see a child and to discover exactly what he or she needs. And I learn from the children. I have not yet met a child who didn't teach me something. From my very first class until today I continue to learn. And we have a great faculty and they have taught me so much.

“As I enter another exciting turning point in my life, I want to thank each of you for what you have given to me, your trust, your camaraderie, your wisdom, your dedicated work, your friendship and the love of your children. You have taught me much,” she writes. “It's been a great journey.”