

School Volunteers Honored at Thursday Luncheon

BY MARY KATE MURPHY

Staff Writer

When he helped start a junior Kiwanis program at McDeeds Creek Elementary, Curtis Richie wanted to give children a way to make a positive difference in their community.

Since then, he's led by example every step of the way.

Moore County Schools named Richie its Volunteer of the Year for 2021-2022 during a Thursday luncheon at Weymouth Center in Southern Pines. Nominees from each school in the district were recognized in the district's 17th annual Eileen Vansant Volunteer of the Year reception.

The awards nod to the PTA presidents, band and athletic boosters and reading tutors with their therapy dogs who have all become indispensable members of the team at their schools.

Vansant herself began volunteering as a math tutor at Southern Pines Elementary at the age of 81 after retiring from a 40-year teaching career. She eventually earned the 2003 N.C. Governor's Volunteer Service Award and the N.C. Association for Community Education's Mary Jane Kissler Volunteer Award in 2004.

Linda Hubbard, the district's volunteer coordinator at the time, established the district-wide volunteer award in Vansant's honor after her death in 2004.

"If we were to take the time to count up all of the days and all of the hours that our volunteers provide to Moore County Schools, I'm sure it would be in the hundreds, possibly in the thousands over a year's period of time," said school board Chair Pam Thompson.

"We certainly know that we could not make it without our volunteers."

Teachers and administrators know that better now than they ever have. For more than a year after the onset of COVID-19, restrictions designed to curb the spread of the virus prevented community members from volunteering on public school campuses. Thursday's reception was the first since 2019.

Richie, a resident of Whispering Pines, also helps support Kiwanis programs at Carthage Elementary, Pinehurst



Curtis Richie, Moore County Schools' Eileen Vansant Volunteer of the Year for 2021-2022, with Moore County Board of Education Chair Pam Thompson. Richie was nominated by McDeeds Creek Elementary Principal Molly Capps for helping organize the school's Kiwanis K-Kids Club.

MARY KATE MURPHY / The Pilot

Elementary, Crains Creek Middle, The O'Neal School and Sandhills Community College. He was Carthage's nominee for Volunteer of the Year in 2019.

McDeeds Creek's K-Kids club was the product of a chance encounter between Richie and school counselor Michelle Crews before the school even opened in 2019. The club chartered that fall with 70 students.

Now it counts well over 100 third-through fifth-graders. Since then, they've collected toys and games for cancer patients at UNC Children's Hospital, clothing for children at the Boys and Girls Homes of North Carolina in Lake Waccamaw and raised funds for local animal rescue.

This summer, it was one of 26 K-Kids clubs out of 1,400 worldwide recognized by the Kiwanis organization as a Distinguished Club.

Richie shies away from taking the credit. It's the students, he said, who rise to every occasion.

"The first year we had a food drive at Christmastime for the food bank and I didn't know what to expect, so we just stacked everything in a corner," he said. "When it got done, I had 4,000 pounds of

food that I had to transfer from the hall into boxes, onto a wagon, out to my car..."

Principal Molly Capps said that students' enthusiasm for K-Kids reflects Richie's and Crews' ability to get them excited about such unglamorous goals as collecting underwear and diapers.

Toward the end of the last school year, the club sprung into action to "adopt" an orphanage in Ukraine forced to move after the Russian invasion. Through a parent's military connections, the club collected basic supplies and toiletries for the new, safer location.

"In their minds, that's a group of people that needed help, and we needed to target them and get them help," said Capps. "Curtis empowers them to think about others. He's got this next generation of servant-leaders coming out of the woodwork now."

Capps has found that the club resonates with students personally, for instance giving students who have survived childhood cancer a reason to mention their experience for the first time.

Behind the scenes, though, it's Richie convincing her to host blood drives, arriving at 6 a.m. to set up, and doing the

jobs no one else would think of: picking up trash near the school, making sure that unclaimed lost-and-found items at the end of the school year get washed and distributed to children in need.

Three years and about 3,000 pairs of socks and underwear later, the students still continue to surprise him.

"When I was their age, I couldn't think beyond my lunch or baseball practice after school," said Richie. "Here they are thinking about kids with cancer."

Nominees for the 2021-2022 Eileen Vansant Volunteer of the Year included:

- Heidi Whitescarver, Aberdeen Elementary;
- Kristen Beavers, Cameron Elementary;
- Suzie and All Wall and reading dog Banie, Carthage Elementary;
- Claudie McKenzie and Robert Hunter, Community Learning Center at Pinckney;
- Rhonda Honeycutt, Crains Creek Middle;
- Dawn Marley, Elise Middle;
- Bill Russell, Highfalls Elementary;
- Erica Davis, New Century Middle;
- Jill Brown, North Moore High;
- Lisa Hees, Pinecrest High;
- Ray Lizzio and reading dog Deke, Pinehurst Elementary;
- Alyse Spearman, Robbins Elementary;
- Kelly Payne, Sandhills Farm Life Elementary;
- Christine Lowder, Southern Middle;
- Mary Beth Griswold, Southern Pines Elementary;
- Matt Buchanan, Union Pines High;
- Kayla Barrickman, Vass-Lakeview Elementary;
- Melissa Osterbur, West End Elementary;
- Meredith Morgan, West Pine Elementary;
- Allison McCloskey, West Pine Middle; and,
- Kelly and Jeremy Jackson, Westmoore Elementary.

Contact Mary Kate Murphy at (910) 693-2479 or mkmurphy@thepilot.com.