

Leader Among Us: Principal fearlessly leads with passion, enthusiasm

Written by Darci Tomky

“True passion is extremely hard to find in today’s society, but I believe Susan is very passionate about her job as not only a leader of our school but also as an educator.”

Passion, commitment, dedication and drive were just a few of the words nominator Angela Powell used to describe Susan Ortner, this year’s Leader Among Us for the 2013 Emerald Awards.

Currently in her sixth year as principal at Holyoke JR/SR High, it’s clear Ortner is deserving of the award by not only the abundance of school staff nomination letters but by the impact she has had on the school.

“In this leadership role, it is frequently obvious that she is committed to making a positive difference in the lives of her students and teachers,” said nominator Ashley Clayton, citing Ortner as someone who is strong and unwavering.

This Emerald Award recognizes and honors Ortner for her fearless leadership, guidance, enthusiasm and selfless dedication to her profession.



Holyoke JR/SR High School Principal Susan Ortner is dedicated to building personal relationships with her staff and students, encouraging them both in the classroom and beyond. Ortner, pictured above center, has fun during the seniors versus faculty

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fundraising basketball game in March. Pictured at left is family and consumer science teacher Karen Pieper (Ortner's future daughter-in-law), and at right is senior Elissa Baker.

—Enterprise photo

Teaching runs in the family

"That was all I was going to do from the time I was little," said Ortner, never doubting she would fulfill her dream of becoming an educator.

Ortner's mom, Jean Stone (now Jean Graham), was a home economics teacher, as well as some physical education and social studies, in Del Norte. She followed in the footsteps of her mom, Ethel Lyttle, who taught what was then called household arts in Los Angeles, Calif.

Having her mom as an instructor in grades 7-12, Ortner said she was a really good teacher and someone she looked to as a role model.

Ortner said she always knew she would go to CSU, earning her Bachelor of Science degree in vocational home economics education in 1977. She said she's always enjoyed the food side of home ec but also really enjoyed her child development classes.

This third-generation home ec teacher started out in Berthoud for four years before moving to Holyoke in 1981. After three years of substitute teaching and a little bit of girls' basketball coaching, Ortner became the HHS home economics teacher in 1984—a position, now known as family and consumer sciences, she would hold for 20 years.

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It certainly boasts dedication when Ortner totals up her 32 years as an advisor for Future Homemakers of America and Family, Career and Community Leaders of America, better known as FHA and FCCLA.

Ortner said counseling really touched on the areas she is familiar with, so in 2005 she took over the HHS counseling position, earning her master's degree from the University of Phoenix in school counseling and human services in 2006 and a Type D Certificate and Colorado approved program for principal licensure in 2007.

That year former principal Dave Rice retired, giving Ortner the opportunity to explore the role of JR/SR High principal.

Ortner a pillar of support for educators

Besides the many meetings and committees with which a principal is required to participate, Ortner is deserving of the leadership award because, according to nominator Kimberlee Bennett, "She is not afraid to lead!"

Ortner is firm, consistent, organized, detail-oriented and timely, qualities that positively affect the efficiency and attitudes of those around her. "Everything she does is a priority, and every priority is done well," said Summer Maloney in her nomination letter.

"Without her leadership, we would be lost," added Maloney. "She has no fear as she heads out to lead our staff in the right direction."

Whether she is collaborating with educators during Friday morning meetings or leading a committee, Ortner works to make people feel included and knowledgeable about what is

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expected of them in this profession.

“I assure teachers we’re going down the right track,” said Ortner, a principal who must continually deal with industry changes in evaluations, grading, after school programs and curriculum.

Her nominators said she guides them through these changes with current information to keep them at the forefront, providing positive communication and using problem solving to come to successful solutions.

“She models what she demands of others,” said Bennett. She leads with honesty and by example, added Powell, never asking anything of staff that she doesn’t do or wouldn’t be willing to do.

Ortner serves on committees including the Leadership Team, Standards of Excellence, District Wellness, Positive Behavior Support (discipline matrix) and the Administrative Council.

As one who sets up her teachers for success, Ortner said she loves getting into the classrooms. It’s all about seeing students learn and teachers teach, she said.

“I knew that I was supported and that she cared about my success,” said nominator Allie Billings, citing Ortner was in her classroom every day for the first couple weeks in her new position at the JR/SR High.

When she’s not giving high fives and pats on the back to her teachers, Ortner is a “sounding board, a shoulder to cry on and a source of sound advice,” said Clayton. She knows her staff personally, each one being more than just a staff member to her. “She rides the ups and downs with all of us and strives to have a positive impact in our lives,” added Clayton.

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