

Austin opts for retirement after 20 years

Written by Brenda Johnson Brandt

A feeling of satisfaction makes Holyoke Elementary School teacher Mary Austin very happy with her decision to retire at the end of the current school year.

She and her husband Jim are retiring at the same time and look forward to time together. Jim retired in March from his position as agronomy plant manager for Grainland Co-op.

Their time together will be spent with family, with traveling and with projects at home, said Mary. To start with, she said she has five big boxes of photographs, one for each of their five children. With her oldest child being 42, and the next 40 and so on, she figures she has close to 200 years of pictures to organize.

Austin's teaching career involved just over 20 years of actual teaching but spanned 44 years, from 1969-2013. It included a year in the first-grade classroom, three long-term substitute jobs, two years as a speech teacher, 12 years in kindergarten and five years in the Title I program.

She was honored last month as the 2013 Heart Award winner in the annual Emerald Award program. That recognition program clearly reflected on the dedication and love that Austin brings to her teaching.



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Mary Austin marks her last week at Holyoke Elementary School as she retires at the end of the 2012-13 school year.

—Enterprise photo

After earning her bachelor's degree from then-Colorado State College in Greeley in 1969, Austin taught one school year as a first-grade teacher in Holyoke. Her degree was completed with a double major in elementary education and arts and sciences and a minor in social sciences.

In her first year as a teacher, Austin remembers being surrounded by a good group of veteran teachers. Specifically, she recalls Dick Potter, Velma and Kelma Lohmann, Louise Ewegen and Dorothy Anderson.

She gained an appreciation for being an educator that year, recognizing that college prepares one for the big things, but the little details of the job as a teacher can make or break the day in the classroom.

Learning she was expecting their first child, Austin resigned her teaching position after one year. The next 20-plus years found her in full teaching mode—but not in a school classroom.

She admits it was during those years of raising their family that she learned what it was to really be a teacher and the important role that parents play in their children's education.

Now finishing close to two decades in the actual classroom, Austin still believes that the key to success in a school is parental support. "It makes the biggest impact on children," she said.

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Just because Austin wasn't employed by the school system doesn't mean she didn't continue her natural role as an educator during her two-and-a-half-decade hiatus.

In addition to being a parent who was very involved in her children's education, Austin served as a catechism teacher, director of religious education for St. Patrick Parish and a 4-H leader and worked as the original coordinator for Baby's First Steps home visitor program in Phillips and Sedgwick counties.

Austin had a rather informal, impromptu return to the school district. She tells it like this:

She stopped by the school to drop off something one day and asked then-principal Jim Yakel if he needed any substitute teachers. He said he would add her to the list.

Before the day was over, he found her at Ardie's, where she was getting her hair cut, and asked her to return that afternoon to cover a classroom.

From there, she covered three different long-term substitute assignments and enjoyed them all. Filling in for high school math teacher Dan Watson found Austin teaching two of her own children. She said it was during that assignment that she learned she really loved math.

She then filled in on a long-term basis for maternity leaves for Cathy Sullivan and Natalie Krogmeier. Again, one of her own children was in Sullivan's class.

From 1994-96, Austin served as a speech teacher at Holyoke Elementary before starting her 12-year stint in the kindergarten classroom.

Kindergarten was great fun, admits Austin. Yakel told her that her job was to cause her students to love school. And she took that purpose to heart.

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Expectations for what was to be accomplished in the kindergarten classroom had changed drastically since Austin's year as a first-grade teacher in 1969-70. But even with the more extensive academic expectations, she incorporated lots of fun field trips.

Students enjoyed outings to such places as Brad Rhea's studio in Merino and a tour of his tree carving works in Sterling, to Wisdom Manufacturing in Merino where they made carnival rides, to wind farms, Colglazier tree farm, Cabela's and more.

Austin credits parents and her wonderful classroom aides for their help with the field trips, as well as math and other academic centers.

"Naive that I was, I thought I would change the theme of the room every month," said Austin when reflecting on her first year in the kindergarten classroom. She soon learned that one theme a year was plenty.

She had seven themes that she rotated, coordinating name plates, attendance charts, bulletin boards, calendars and wall murals. Whether it was a castle, farm, space, under the sea or circus, Austin sought to have kids start school with excitement and ready to have fun while learning at the same time.

While Austin was still in the kindergarten teacher role, Reading First became a huge part of the elementary school curriculum. She was a leader in the building-level team that met regularly to discuss students' needs, resources and interventions.

Teachers traveled for extensive training that built camaraderie, said Austin. It was challenging, but fun, she added.

They were observed constantly in the classroom and gained a real appreciation for data tracking, which Austin said was amazing.

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Teachers took data to the building leadership team where they could look at student needs, visit with previous teachers, look at trends in children and share ideas about resources.

It was very intense, said Austin, noting they had coaches from Seattle, Wash., Colorado Springs and Denver. Catch-words for the Reading First program were bell-to-bell teaching, fidelity to the core, modeling and templates.

When Austin moved to the Title I classroom in the fall of 2008, she still led one reading group during her day.

The rest of her school day was spent with Title I for small group intervention in reading and math.

Austin credits co-teacher Cathy Sullivan, whose philosophy was to have kids enjoy going to Title I so they would look forward to it.

Sullivan mixed learning activities into the curriculum. Austin said she was used to the kindergarten level, and it was great to see the materials available for all grade levels in Title I to teach in different ways.

Title I is a government program, explained Austin, noting that data had to be collected to justify students going in and exiting the program. Time had to be productive, as the students were missing actual time in their classroom.

Research shows that early intervention is most beneficial, noted Austin.

"I can see the difference Title I has made in students' lives and would hope that opportunities for intervention would continue in our school district," she added.

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Austin was genuine in expressing how grateful she is for the time she spent as a teacher at Holyoke Elementary School. “There’s still more work to do, and I see so many dedicated teachers carrying on.”

Mary and Jim’s family is a great source of pride and may see a little more of the couple now that they’re in their retirement.

Their son Chris and his wife Julie live in Denver, where Chris is a sales manager for IBM; daughter Trudy Herman and her husband Dennis live in Holyoke, where Trudy serves as a speech pathologist/audiologist in area nursing homes and hospitals; son Toby is an accountant with an international firm in Denver; daughter Annie and her husband Hill Slothower live in Denver, where Annie is an at-home mom and is starting her own business in party-planning; and daughter Natalie is a deaf educator in Denver, works as an interpreter for the deaf, is active in deaf theater and is at the mid-point of earning her doctorate.

The Austins’ eight grandchildren, ranging in age from preschool to just finishing eighth grade, are a source for much grandparent pride.

Summing up her teaching career, Austin said, “We learn from one another. I’ve learned from the children, from my mentors—and my family still isn’t done teaching me!”

Holyoke Enterprise May 23, 2013