

LORAIN

# One student at a time

Focus is on each individual student for one teacher

By **Kaylee Remington**  
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Cindy Ortiz has a big job every day when it comes to teaching her students.

Ortiz, a fifth-grade teacher at Helen Steiner Rice Elementary School in Lorain, focuses on each student individually in making sure her students succeed when they are in her classroom.

Rice is the first school in the district to have full inclusion of all students with a learning disability in the regular classroom.

Ortiz, who has been teaching for 24 years, said she has students in her class with cognitive disabilities, but they are fully included in the curriculum and the classroom. She does receive assistance in the classroom with an intervention specialist.

"He's like my partner teacher and this is how we produce really good results in the schools and the fifth grade," Ortiz said. "In my class we do a lot of project based activities."

When she is preparing assignments and projects, she differentiates a lot and modifies them for each individual student based on their learning level. She stressed that she is focused on each student's learning

styles.

"I do projects that allow them to show what they learn that's really important because some do it better by power point, or poster board or a writing project," Ortiz said. "So they can show me what they have learned through project-based assignments."

She said it's very rewarding to be able to help her students learn through their own styles and she is pleasantly surprised how well the project assignments are working. She along with other teachers are seeing a lot of good growth with their students.

"I mean they are just flourishing in the classroom," Ortiz said.

"When we've seen how well they have been working, we're all just so happy. It's just a better way to teach with our intervention specialists and other grade level teachers."

The project-based learning activities allows students to present their learning in a way where they feel comfortable.

Full inclusion was implemented in the school in January. Ortiz has many students with different disabilities, but, she added no one would be able to tell 99 percent of what they have.

"You wouldn't know," she said. "And I give the kids higher expectations. I hold



ERIC BONZAR — THE MORNING JOURNAL

Helen Steiner Rice Elementary School teacher Cynthia Ortiz helps fifth-grade students Aulonna Tran, 10, and Winton Phillips, 10, with their Board Builder presentations, May 9. The Discovery Education tool allows students to use an iPad to create a digital poster board of their own research, writing, and content creation. Ortiz said the project building and presenting is a way to prepare elementary school children for middle school, where rubrics, public speaking and technology literacy play an integral part in educational development.

my kids to a high standard; they reach the bar higher than if I just had them at a normal level."

Ortiz said it's nice knowing that the administration is seeing that the teachers are excelling with all the students and their intervention specialists. A lot of the teachers have a knack for knowing how to get their

teaching through to their students. Ortiz believes she's got the knack and it's with the help of others.

"It's a teamwork, I don't believe it's just me," she said. "It's all of us working together is what I think is the difference this year."

Ortiz said it's been an amazing experience having all students, no matter what

their struggles may be, in her classroom together.

"The regular learning kids in the classroom just pull those with disabilities up. They've come a long way," she said. "I am proud of my students for letting them in and embracing them. There is no labeling. I've really, as a teacher, have grown because of these and

it has helped me differentiate instruction."

Ortiz said by instruction she means adjusting her curriculum to include all of her students.

"They don't all have to take a pencil and paper to take a test to show me what they know," she said. "This allows them to learn in a comfortable way."

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LORAIN SCHOOLS

# A love for students, teaching

Teacher encourages students to live beyond their circumstances

By Carol Harper  
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In some ways, Jeannette Chappell-Nettles' teaching delves deeper than family.

And it certainly reaches wider, scooping up any child within reach of a hallway hug or a concerned conversation.

"I became a teacher because I discovered a love for students and I really like seeing the light come on for them when they get it," said Chappell-Nettles, who teaches language arts at General Johnnie Wilson Middle School in Lorain. "It's amazing. I think learning has always been in my heart. It took the local neighborhood bully from my hometown to remind me."

She grew up in Toledo. Earned a bachelor's degree at Ohio University. Lived for a year in Mexico. Earned a master's degree at University of Toledo. Served as a social worker. Discovered a love of teaching there and moved to Lorain, starting her teaching career with a classroom of sixth graders in 1998 at the former Hawthorne Elementary building.

"My mom passed away," Chappell-Nettles said. "I had come home. The bully said, 'What do you do now?' I said, 'I'm a teacher.' She said, 'You actually became a teacher? Remember when you always made us play



CAROL HARPER - THE MORNING JOURNAL

Artistry of Jeannette Chappell-Nettles, a language arts teacher at General Johnnie Wilson Middle School, 2700 Washington Ave., Lorain, enables her to encourage students to live beyond their circumstances, she says, because circumstances can change.

school?"

She followed a path of those who inspired her, such as two elementary teachers who impacted her greatly: Ophelia Thompson in the first grade; and Eloise Carey in the third grade.

"They made all the difference in the world," Chappell-Nettles said. "Miss Thompson was a no-nonsense

teacher, but she made you feel like you could do anything in the world. When you would read something, and she knew you were struggling through it, and you were getting better, she would praise you. You would go, 'My teacher said this. My teacher said that.' When I look back on it as an adult, I think that she was

the right amount of education, the right amount of surrogate parent, and the right amount of crazy.

"We were in the first grade. Back then you could paddle. She would dress up. She told us she was half Native American, half vampire bat, and half African American. When she would paddle you she would put on these hairy boots. She would chant to the ancestors. And then she would give you two swats. And we were just like, '(Whisper) oh, my gosh.' We were so, like, 'I'm never going to be bad in Miss Thompson's class. Never."

"There was a whole drama behind it, theatrics. It was amazing. She had a cabinet. And she had a red phone in there. And she would tell us that was her bat phone. And as an adult I realize it was not connected to anything. But if you were acting out in class, she would open up the cabinet and say, 'Do you want me to use the bat phone?' We would say, 'No. That's the red bat phone. No.' And I so love her for that. She was prepared. She planned. And she made the days amazing. I'm like, 'What great stories do we all have now because of her craziness? But she was amazing."

"I think I have some of that in my teaching, that I have the right amount of crazy for an eighth-grader," Chappell-Nettles said. "But I care, too. And I'm going to

**"It's not always easy for our students to focus," Chappell-Nettles said. "They have a lot going on. When you're teaching a lesson and they are able to connect with something, and they get it, oh, I love it."**

— Jeannette Chappell-Nettles, General Johnnie Wilson Middle School teacher

teach you something."

Some of her classroom secrets include extending her reach.

"When things are serious for me, I get really quiet. And then I say to them, 'I put that on my life.' I say, 'If you don't learn this, I will put that on my life. I will be at your house eating dinner with you.' They're like, 'No, you're going to come home?' "One of my other tricks with my students is I will call them. I'm at their events. I tell them, 'Once you're mine, you're mine forever. I will stalk you, whether you have me in the sixth grade or the eighth grade. That's one of my proudest moments, that whole stalking thing. They turn it around and say, 'Yeah, we're going to stalk you, too, Miss Nettles.' And they all come back. Oh, I love it when they come back."

This year she teaches a student whose mother was in her first sixth-grade class in 1998.

"I am just amazed. I feel like I've come full circle,"

Chappell-Nettles said. "In fact, I've taught most of her whole family, and to have her son now? She and I just hugged at parent-teacher conference, and it was just a very emotional and amazing event for me."

"It's great being part of generations from Lorain," Chappell-Nettles said. "I consider the students my children, and an extension of my family. It makes my heart feel good, I feel good about the legacy I leave behind."

She says she owes her artistic handwriting to her third-grade teacher.

"We were learning cursive. She told me my handwriting was horrible and I needed to practice," Chappell-Nettles said. "So I did. I used to sit on the steps and practice all the time."

"I love to draw. I love to put colors upon colors," she said. "Also I'm a writer. I love poetry. For me, bringing all of that together for our students is important. I feel like art, whether

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LORAIN

# Dealing with Teen Issues

Teacher encourages students to open up

By Kelsey Leyva  
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Whether she's planning prom or discussing a topic in her Teen Issues class, it is apparent that Sheryl Di Franco, an English teacher at Lorain High School, genuinely cares about her students.

"She shows us a lot of love," said Angel Amador, a 16-year-old sophomore in Di Franco's Teen Issues class. "I wish I would have met her sooner."

Di Franco has been teaching for the past 20 years with 18 of those in the Lorain City School District. She and fellow teacher Stephanie Siefert worked for 18 hours in summer 2010 to create the curriculum for the Teen Issues course.

"We had to have it aligned with Common Core and all the other important state parameters," she said.

The class isn't your traditional English course, but can count as an English or elective credit, and it focuses on issues faced by teenagers. Students in the class participate in anonymous "fish bowl" discussions, read books and explore topics pertinent to high-school aged children.

"There's a lot of dialogue, a lot of discussion and we talk about just issues and things that teenagers are concerned about, think about or need help with," Di Franco said. "It's kind of a safe place for them to talk about what's on their minds in an anonymous way a lot of the time."

Di Franco said each class develops into a family and Alysia Lorenzana, a 16-year-old junior taking the class, shared the same sentiments.

"Everyone looks out for one another," Lorenzana said. "I enjoy that we talk about teenage things and future life."

Di Franco said the teenage years can be a very confusing time and it's impor-



ERIC BONZAR — THE MORNING JOURNAL

Sheryl Di Franco, Lorain High School English teacher and senior advisor, discusses the school's prom coordination with Mark Stout, 19, who served as the committee's graphic designer, May 3, 2016.

tant the students realize they're not alone.

"Troubles are temporary," she said as the class responded to a fish bowl topic, which was written anonymously by a student in the class.

Jenna Ruiz is an 18-year-old senior and said she loves that the class allows everyone to be open and "talk about basically anything without being judged."

Di Franco said the goal or the intended take away of the class is to treat people with kindness and respect.

"You never really know what people are going through behind closed doors," she said, adding that tolerance and being open minded are also key.

Not long after Di Franco helped create her favorite class to teach, she took on the role as senior adviser, which includes responsibilities such as planning homecoming, winter formal, prom, the senior awards ceremony and all fundraising opportunities. She said



ERIC BONZAR — THE MORNING JOURNAL

Sheryl Di Franco, Lorain High School English teacher and senior advisor, holds "fishbowl discussion" with her teen issues class, May 3. Students are encouraged to anonymously write their concerns, thoughts and questions onto pieces of paper, which Di Franco then reads aloud. May 3 discussions ranged from sexually transmitted diseases and suicide, to the anxiety over an upcoming driving test.

her desire to fill the position sparked after she attended the 2011 prom.

"I just had a bunch of ideas," Di Franco said. "I've always liked the social as-

pect of working with the kids and parties." She said homecoming,

prom and the senior award ceremony are pretty labor-intensive events to plan and wouldn't be possible without help from her senior committee and other staff members.

"All of the stress and aggravation that can be a part of it is erased when I see everyone walk in for the event and see how much fun they have," Di Franco said. "It's so nice to see the kids dressed up, and for some of them this is the fanciest event or party they're going to go to. You can tell they feel good about themselves."

Lorenzana said she looks forward to walking into Di Franco's class every day.

"She's super sweet," Lorenzana said of Di Franco. "She has a great heart."

Amador described Di Franco as more than just your average teacher.

"It's not hard to be open to her," Amador said. "She's a lot different from other teachers. When I leave here she'll leave an impression on me."

## Teaching

FROM PAGE 2

drawing or poetry, is healing. It's healing for the students, too. I love art."

She keeps student creations, and displays them in her room.

This year she's gifting a baby brother with a mask made in her class in 1998

by his oldest brother.

"It's bridging that gap — big brother, little brother — it's keeping it in the family."

She cherishes the moments of breakthrough.

"It's not always easy for our students to focus," Chappell-Nettles said.

"They have a lot going on. When you're teaching a lesson and they are able to connect with something,

and they get it, oh, I love it.

"They are so ready to soak up everything, especially if it resonates with them," she said.

"It is so much easier to teach if they can relate somehow. I like to ask, 'What's your world outside of those 10 blocks around your house? It's our job to connect them to that. (May 12) at the career fair we told them, 'You have to

have a road map. You can't just wake up and you're there. You have to know how you get there.'"

The event, a Career Wax Museum, provided a way for parents to speak with teachers in a relaxed setting.

"That was another beautiful moment, having parents come up and talk about their kids and their projects and how they're

dreaming outside of the box," Chappell-Nettles said.

Encouraging students takes time and persistent presence, she said.

"They know who's there and who's not there," she said.

"We're trying to change the climate in Lorain. We're bringing it all like family in Lorain. You're going to see more of that next year. I think that's what's

great about the last five years at GJW. We made it a home and an extension of family.

"They need a face every day," she said. "They need someone to notice, 'Hey, I'm here. I'm hurting. I need to talk.'"

"I'm a hugger," Chappell-Nettles said.

"These are my kids. I tell them, 'I'm going to hug you because you're my kid.'"

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