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PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Oct. 21, 2016

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Fontana Unified Teacher Named a Finalist for \$20,000 Escalante-Gradillas Prize for Best in Education

FONTANA, CA – Sequoia Middle School teacher Tammy DeVries is one of 10 educators across the nation selected as a finalist for the Escalante-Gradillas Prize for Best in Education, an award that shines a spotlight on educational leaders who exemplify the values, high expectations and characteristics of renowned Garfield High School teacher Jaime Escalante and its former principal, Henry Gradillas.

Bestowed by TheBestSchools.org, a leading resource in school ranking information, the annual award – which comes with a \$20,000 prize for both the winning teacher and school – recognizes outstanding K-12 educators who promote academic integrity and rigor.

“Most of my rewards come from the kids who make it and those whose passions I’ve helped them find,” said DeVries, a Fontana Unified graduate who has taught more than 3,000 students over her 18-year career as a science teacher at her – and her parents’ – alma mater. “To be compared to some of the most renowned educators is a bonus. But most of my satisfaction comes from the kids who come back to me year after year just to shake my hand again.”

The winner and runners-up for the prize will be announced Wednesday, Oct. 26.

“Ms. DeVries has helped set the standard of what it takes to be an exceptional educator, acting as an example to her peers and inspiring her students to achieve excellence,” Fontana Unified Board President Lorena Corona said. “We are proud to call Ms. DeVries, a product of Fontana Unified, one of our own and we commend her for staying in her community and making a positive difference to everyone she comes across.”

A product of Fontana and Fontana Unified, DeVries’ profound connection to her town has shaped the way she teaches and connects with her students, capturing the attention of researchers at Claremont Graduate University who recommended her for the award.

“They were looking at teachers who work in low-income areas and having great success with student test scores,” DeVries said. “In teaching, my question is ‘How do we inspire these kids to love science?’ I’m the first inspiration that they have as seventh-graders.”

DeVries uses detailed instruction and engages in hands-on learning to ensure students have a grasp on the material. She also expects all students to maintain a B- or better. However, she credits the personal connection she makes with students as the biggest contributor to their success.

“I really care about my kids and get to know them from the very beginning. They are my family,” said DeVries, who is also the mother of triplets in middle school. “I have to know their stories and see their lives. I talk to them individually and interview them. We do all these activities so that they know that I care. That connection I make with them really sets the tone all year.”

Data from DeVries’ classes show that eighth-grade students have posted near-perfect scores on state tests, their math and language arts scores have increased, and writing and reading skills have improved. DeVries also credits Principal Gorge Santiago for his commitment to the school, teachers and students for motivating her to mold generations of future scientists.

“I have such a passion for what I do because these are my kids and this is my town,” DeVries said. “I sat in their seats and know what it’s like to be a Sequoia student. I want to show them that they can grow up and do anything. If I didn’t love this, I wouldn’t do this and I want my students to feel that.”

Escalante and Gradillas earned renown more than 30 years ago for their inspiring work with at-risk students, a story told in the 1988 film “Stand and Deliver.” Driven by the belief that every child deserves the same opportunities, the pioneering duo pushed students to settle for nothing less than the highest level of academic achievement, as demonstrated by their unprecedented success on the Advanced Placement Calculus exams.

The best candidates for the prize are those who overcome stiff challenges, but are still able to inspire students to high levels of academic achievement.

“Ms. DeVries has been a catalyst for academic achievement at Fontana Unified, inspiring our students to develop a love of science, cultivating an environment that is conducive to student learning and blazing a path for other teachers to follow,” Fontana Unified Interim Superintendent Randal Bassett said. “I want to commend Ms. DeVries for the positive impact she has made on our students.”

PHOTO CAPTION:

DEVRIES: Sequoia Middle School teacher Tammy DeVries teaches students in her science class. She is one of 10 educators across the nation selected as a finalist for the Escalante-Gradillas Prize for Best in Education, an award that shines a spotlight on educational leaders.

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