

Fran Squires, M. Ed 2014 Outstanding Middle Level Educator Award Nominee Narrative:

The beloved Harper Lee recently declared on her 88th birthday that she would finally release *To Kill a Mockingbird* on e-book, but that she still thinks “dusty old books are better.” I stand in solidarity with Miss Lee as I too will never hold her book in any way except by my “dusty old copy.” I think that the only good thing about the e-book release is that my young techno- metal handed students may actually read some great literature because it is on e-book. Not daunted by this reality, I continue to mix the old with the new by teaching them using my “dusty old books” and passionately performed Book Talks. A few years ago, one of my middle school students labeled me and my colleague “literary stalkers” due to our out of control excitement over meeting Robert Pinsky, George Ella Lyon, Dorothy Allison, Sharon Draper and Walter Dean Myers when we were presenters at NCTE in Cincinnati, Ohio. I have worn that label proudly as I extol to the X-box generation the joy of having my signed “dusty old books” by authors I adore. I strive to help my fledging writers improve their skills through numerous writing opportunities in hopes that perhaps one of them will want to become a writer who wins the Pulitzer Prize. I tell them that they owe me this so I can brag to the other old ladies in the nursing home that I was their teacher who made them write, write and write some more.

Horace Mann once said, “Every addition to knowledge is an addition to human power.” My outstanding English teachers made me feel powerful, and they opened many doors of opportunity for me. Forty-one years later, thousands of hours under my brow, I know that students are astute observers of a teacher’s every action, word and step. While being watched by those impressionable young eyes, I craft unique lessons to ignite a passion for writing with my students each year. Inspired by the great Eudora Welty as I touched her desk in her Jackson, Mississippi bedroom where she wrote every day, her words, “all serious daring starts from within” are the driving force for me and my students. As a teacher I dare myself to attain personal and professional growth, and I work diligently to provide opportunities for my students to “dare” themselves to achieve the same. As I spend the last years of my career with sixth graders who are full of angst, drama, and raging hormones, my goal is to help them navigate the waters of

the maturation process while achieving academic success. I want my students to see “the rose in the vase, not the dust on the table.” Through the successful development of original products and projects that integrate service learning with ELA Common Core State Standards, I have provided my students with an environment rich in creativity, high expectations, and opportunity to become strong readers and writers. Using my grant writing ability to procure funds, I have taken students on the road to discovery of Newbery authors and their prize winning books with research, reading and artistically designed dinner plates that showed their ingenuity. This year my students learned how to become entrepreneurs by reading TOMS CEO, Blake Mycoskie’s informational text: *Start Something that Matters*. I led them through the mechanics of writing a business proposal and creating a product for profit: Dangerous Chocolate Cake in an Ugly Mug for which I am being honored on May 9 in Tampa, FL at the Florida Council on Economics Governor’s Award for Classroom Teaching Excellence. The profits from the sale of the mugs and ingredients for a micro-wave dessert are earmarked for The Center for Building HOPE in our community that supports individuals struggling in their fight against cancer. One of my students lost his mother to that battle just recently, so we do this in her honor as well.

As a National teacher Advisor for SCOPE magazine for several years, I have relished that great honor to bring a quality product to my students and provide feedback to the editors on material selection and our curriculum needs. I have mentored co-workers on how to implement that magazine in our pre-AP curriculum. I fund and publish the only Middle school level literary magazine: **Portable Prose and Poetry**. This work is the culmination of the best writing from the year. Students evaluate and select 100 pages of bound copy with original art and quote cover. Special writing medals are awarded to my writing contest winners each year. We do have “contest fever.” My students have won local, state and national writing contests that have garnered a trip to New York to meet Taylor Swift, a four year pre-paid college scholarship and reception with the Governor, prize money, publication and enormous smiles and immensely proud parents. As Carol Ryrie Brink, author of a childhood favorite *Caddie Woodlawn* said, “Children need the lift and thrill of imaginative writing as well as the tangible foundation of facts.” I use

every opportunity to both hone the craft of writing through writer's workshops, teacher/peer conferences, and instructional techniques I have learned at the Sun Coast Writer's conferences. Carl Hiaasen, Frank McCourt, Margaret Atwood, and Jill McCorkle insisted that technology does not matter, paper and pencil is the best way to teach young writers. So, I listened and success has been ours! As a winner of several National Endowment for the Humanities' summer training opportunities, I studied Zora Neale Hurston and Eudora Welty. I procured a treasured class set of Eudora Welty's only children's book, *The Shoe Bird*. Students took a virtual tour of where she wrote and created a writer's sanctuary in our portable classroom.

I think the exemplary lesson I teach my students is that I value their opinions of my literary work. I encourage students to critique my drafts as I write alongside them on poems, literary analysis responses and stories or essays. I share with them drafts on things I do outside of class and seek their input and ideas. I implemented George Ella Lyon's *A Many Storied House* technique for writing a memory map poem this year. The heartfelt submissions made my knees buckle. One entire class crafted a poem about our classroom and the sensory responses, memories and emotions associated with our space. It will be showcased in our literary magazine this year. One special activity I have done year after year with students is to make bound books of their letters to a particular author: this year the beneficiary is Gary Schmidt as we read *The Wednesday Wars and Okay for Now*. The students shared their thoughts on his work with him in their friendly letters. We have received wonderful notes of appreciation from our chosen authors in the past such as Carl Hiaasen, the late Reynolds Price, and Nikki Giovanni to name a few. The holidays bring short story writing which always includes the reading and viewing of Truman Capote's *A Christmas Memory*. It never fails to raise the lump in the throat for several and maybe not the response I hope for from a few. On a chilly day we had in Florida this year, a young man last to enter the room leaned in to me as I held open the door and said, "Mrs. Squires, "it's fruitcake season." His reference to the weather from *A Christmas Memory* made tears fill my eyes because there it was, my two kites rising up to heaven with my literary heart and his entwined. They do get "it" and they get me...