Teacher of the Year: Pojoaque music guru keeps students in tune

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By Robert Nott

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It's just past noon on a Wednesday in the music class of Pojoaque Valley High School teacher Debra Minyard — and cacophony reigns.

About 40 kids are coming into the room, picking up their instruments and starting to experiment with them as they move chairs into place for band practice.

"They sound better once they get started," Minyard says.

Soon she has them seated and working on breathing exercises. "You're cheating!" she tells one girl who is holding back on exhaling. As the students create a collective sound similar to the noise a tractor-trailer tire might make while slowly losing air, Minyard keeps time by snapping her fingers.

And then it's time to focus and play a rendition of the gentle, soothing "Korean Folk Rhapsody." Minyard commands her students' attention as she conducts in theatrical fashion, shouting out specific instructions to students who are too loud, too fast, not loud enough or not fast enough.

Teacher of the Year: Pojoaque music teacher keeps students in tune

Debra Minyard of Pojoaque Valley High School the New Mexico's "Teacher of the year" teaching her 9th thru 12th grade Concert Band class on Wednesday November 19, 2014 in Pojoaque, New Mexico. Clyde Mueller/The New Mexican

"Hunter, you're perfectly in time and way too strong in approach," she tells one percussionist.

As far as her students are concerned, Minyard is always in time and never too strong in approach.

"She treats you the way you want to be treated," said junior Teresa Solano. "Teachers always say, 'act like adults,' but they don't teach us how to be adults. She does. And she treats us like adults."

New Mexico's Public Education Department named Minyard Teacher of the Year for 2015. She found out on a Saturday in late October when she got a vague email from an administrative assistant saying she was now eligible to become National Teacher of the Year. She put two and two together

and then called her principal and superintendent to confirm the news.

Principal Kathy McClendon nominated Minyard based on criteria for the award, which includes being a highly effective teacher, using best practices in the classroom and maintaining strong student attendance.

Minyard draws attention to her teaching with a confident flair and she maintains a respectful tone as she deals directly with each student. Criticism is balanced with praise. No one in her class seems offended or withdrawn or out of line on this day.

"She's really passionate about what she does. She makes me want to be as passionate as she is," said junior Adriana Lopez.

Her kids say that though they don't hang out with one another much outside of Minyard's class, she draws them together fast like a family. "And she's our mom," one said.

Growing up in Biddeford, Maine, the 39-year-old Minyard described herself as a shy child. "You would never know I was in the room," she said. Her introduction to music came in the form of a trombone put into her hands when she was in the fourth grade. It didn't fit her personality, she said: "A trombone is in your face. A flute is quiet and gentle." So she played the flute instead. She still does.

Following college, she taught for five years in a Maine school and then gave it up because she felt she was a bad teacher. She asked God to send her a sign as to what to do — "and make it big!"

Almost immediately, three friends told her to go to Santa Fe. She posted her résumé online and got a call to interview for the Pojoaque district. She got the job and flew out to New Mexico, landing at the airport in Albuquerque in August 2003. As she descended the elevator there, she saw and heard a mariachi band playing below. That was the big sign, she said.

She loves teaching again, and she loves the people, food, geography and students of the Pojoaque Valley. People welcomed her and wanted to hear her story, she said. "Being an outsider, it would have been easy to be disregarded, but that didn't happen at all," Minyard said.

The best thing about teaching is that moment when the kids "get it," she said. "It's a gift they just acquired and you helped facilitate that."

The worst thing is the loss of a student. "Suicide, kids injuring themselves, there was an accident and someone's gone — no amount of school prep trains you for that day," Minyard said.

Her husband, Joshua, works for Los Alamos National Laboratory. They have a cat called Chaco and they like to hike and kayak.

Minyard said she hopes the Teacher of the Year honor allows her to express the importance of music

education, which is about creating life skills, fostering collaboration and balancing right brain and left brain skills.

"I think sometimes people confuse this award title with 'best teacher of the year,' and that's just not true. There's a lot of 'best' teachers in this state," she said.

According to the Public Education Department website, the New Mexico Teacher of the Year Program began in 1963. Each year, all 89 state public school districts and the nearly 100 state charter schools are invited to nominate an outstanding teacher for the honor. This teacher represents New Mexico in the National Teacher of the Year competition. Minyard and the other teachers will fly to Washington, D.C., early next year and the National Teacher of the Year will be chosen by April.

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