

On Behalf of the Students
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When teacher Judy Garrard caught a student doodling during a lesson, she knew what to do: she helped him to get accepted to a local magnet school that focused on art. That's the kind of learning environment — one sensitive to the needs of individual students — she is working to create.

At Roosevelt Middle School in West Palm Beach, you'll find children from many cultures, children of the very wealthy and the very poor. You'll also find Judy Garrard, an SGI-USA member and dedicated teacher, fulfilling her heart's desire: to foster the development of each student.

That's a tall order, Ms. Garrard knows — one that she can't fill alone. Fortunately for her and her students, she has found a mentor and ally in Jack Thompson, Roosevelt's principal.

Mr. Thompson has worked with Ms. Garrard for 12 years, and has watched her grow personally and professionally. He thinks of her as family.

"She is just like my own daughter," Mr. Thompson says. "I find in Judy that which a father would be very happy to see: his child really striving to be the best she can be."

At times when Ms. Garrard has felt intimidated by a parent or another teacher, Mr. Thompson has supported and encouraged her because he knows that her heart is dedicated to the students' happiness. "Anything Judy puts her mind to, she will accomplish," he says.

One thing that Ms. Garrard would like to accomplish is the creation of a learning environment that's sensitive to the needs of each individual student. For example, Ms. Garrard once saw a student doodling during a lesson. Instead of reprimanding the child and asking him to pay attention to the lesson, she asked him if he'd rather go to the area magnet school that focused on art. [Roosevelt is a magnet school specializing in math, science and technology.] The child was very excited about the prospect. He made a portfolio from drawings on his bedroom wall and was accepted into the new school.

Ms. Garrard's greatest challenge is time: she never has enough of it. Instead of grading papers during her breaks, she's either helping a student or talking to a parent. "When students come to me with a problem," she says, "I try to give them encouragement."

She has always brought her work home, even while raising her own two children and being active in her Buddhist practice.

As the West Palm Beach District leader, she understands how important it is to support youth. "It was in the youth division that I learned how to chant through my problems and win," she says.

Ms. Garrard's main focus is on technology, and she shares responsibility for the technical programs at Roosevelt. When Ms. Garrard was first put in charge of technical support, she was not computer literate. She learned the basics from a colleague who soon left the school. "After that, I struggled through, using my Buddhist practice, determination and seeking mind," she says. She recently completed a course to become a certified Novell administrator.

During each class period, small groups of Ms. Garrard's technical support students receive practical training by assisting her with her tasks. Trouble-shooting skills are a large part of what each student learns. When problems arise, the students are usually the ones who come to the rescue and resolve the difficulties. In Ms. Garrard's class, students and teacher learn together.

At Roosevelt, Ms. Garrard promoted a problem-solving lab based on the Scan Competency Program, the U.S. Education Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills. The lab gives students real-life problems to solve as a group, such as finding a way to reduce the cost of lighting the school building. Students test their solution by implementing it in special computer software that gives them feedback on the outcome. To Ms. Garrard — and the students — this is meaningful education.

“The lab simulates real life business practice,” Ms. Garrard says. “Even though it's simulated instead of real-world, the lab gives the students a sample of real-life problem solving and helps to develop their skills in this area. I believe I'm going in the right direction.”

Ms. Garrard's care for her students — and the support of Mr. Thompson — have helped her overcome her own lack of confidence and driven her to strive even more on their behalf. As Mr. Thompson once told her, a teacher can help 30 students, but an administrator can affect an entire school. Ms. Garrard took this to heart and went back to school to earn her master's degree, which will enable her to work in administration and ultimately become a principal.

Roosevelt Middle School recently received a National Magnet School of Distinction award, which was given not only for the achievement of racial balance but for all the varied programs initiated at the school. As chairperson for the school advisory committee and past chairperson of the instructional innovation team, Ms. Garrard had a large part in creating award-winning programs.

Mr. Thompson feels that Ms. Garrard will rise in the school district because she has courage, patience, endurance and the ability to work with diverse groups. “An administrator who can't work with diverse populations, such as the one at Roosevelt, will be ineffective,” Mr. Thompson says.

Not long ago, Ms. Garrard had an opportunity to apply for the position of vice principal at Roosevelt. After several interviews, the School Board saw in her the right person for the job. She accepted the offer.

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