

# Spring 2020 Federation Star Article on 2020 Stand Up for Justice Educator Grants

Dear Federation Members,

Stand Up for Justice came about after a 2009 series of incidents at a Naples Middle School. The day was named KICK A JEW DAY by the student perpetrators, based on a popular TV show's episode called "Kick a Ginger (redhead) Day." Student on student discrimination, bullying, and abuse rarely happen in front of adults, but in this case a brave victim went and told her principal, who handled it responsibly and masterfully. It is probable that most of you, like me, experienced some kind of inexcusable discriminatory behavior as we were growing up. Unfortunately, children can be cruel to each other. This has not changed over time. So, as a former high school teacher, I wanted to do something about it to hopefully change our little corner of the world.

No child/person should be treated disrespectfully for any reason, let alone because of differences such as race, religion, ethnicity, gender, or such mundane things such as weight, height, or even a face with many pimples existing between the perpetrator and the victim. Professional educators have the best chance to make a difference for thousands by sensitizing children to understand and respect those differences among them. I took my idea for a grant to celebrate educators who did this to the Jewish Community Relations Council of the Jewish Federation of Greater Naples. The president and board liked the idea and have most generously supported it ever since. Grant recipients have included elementary, middle, and high school teachers of language arts, art, home economics, social studies, technology, school counselors, school psychologists, and even principals, etc.

Although open to all schools, public and private, the Collier County School District has really taken the idea to heart. Twice a school year, October and January, flyers and applications are explained and distributed at principals' meetings in addition to having these go out on district email blasts.

I want to thank the wonderful judges who determine each years' recipients. Some have changed over the years. Last year we lost Ruth Dorfman, who passed away suddenly. Ruth was one of our original judges, a kind and sweet person who believed so deeply in our mission, and we dearly miss her. Thank you to original judges Jane Kiester and Melissa Keel still participating, as well as our other judges Marla Weiss, Ida Margolis, and Shelly Lieb, along with Betty Schwartz, chair of the JCRC.

Because of the COVID-19 outbreak, we are unable at this time to have the usual celebrations recognizing the work of our recipients and all they are doing for our children, our future citizens, to make the world a better place. Those celebrations will come at a future time, but Stand Up for Justice had several worthy submissions that you should know about, so I am writing about them here.

We awarded an Honorable Mention to Shannon Beauvais, a third grade teacher at Golden Gate Elementary School. Shannon followed up on the Kindness Initiative, which has grown and spread so beautifully in the district since our 2017 recipient changed the student culture in her middle school. Shannon recognized that in times of sadness, anger, or loneliness kids could be hard on themselves thinking negative thoughts. She created the I Am Wall, where students add positive character words about themselves to I Am.... thus she taught them to take care of themselves as well as others. She also used the Dr. Seuss book THE GRINCH WHO STOLE CHRISTMAS to teach kindness. In early December the Grinch arrives in the classroom with nasty negative messages. Students mirror them with words of

anger and revenge, but over the month a kind word or gesture by one student engenders a responding kind word or gesture by another until the students see that kindness begets kindness and utilize that more. Soon the Grinch's actions and words change and his heart seems to grow.

The judges awarded our 3rd Place grant to Katherine Carney, school counselor at Mike Davis Elementary School. For me this placement is nothing short of amazing; the deadline for submitting an application was February 14th, and although Katherine so passionately has worked the entire school year improving the lives of MDE's students (73% from homes with languages other than English, 93% economically needy) in so many caring ways according to her principal, she only began the specifics for this grant on February 3rd! So in barely a week there was enough evidence of positive change to catch the attention of our judges!

CCPS asks that different character traits be highlighted each month in schools. February's focus was Kindness. Katherine instituted the "Great MDE Kindness Challenge" on February 3rd. In the main lobby Katherine constructed a visual so students could see the goal (200 acts of kindness for the month) and the progress towards the goal; each classroom received a poster allowing classes to tally and track its kindness acts. The staff mailroom had a bulletin board with ideas for teachers to complete with their students such as "write thank you notes to custodians, clean up cafeteria trash that is not yours, play with someone new at recess today." Teachers and students began excitedly posting their acts on Twitter. Students were stopping Katherine in the hallways to express their excitement. She created a "Be the I in Kind" banner that became a photo opportunity for teachers, students, and community to show their pride in their kindness acts. The MDE Spirit Club created over 20 inspirational posters to hang all over the school. Messages were broadcast on the school news channel along with a Mystery Kindness Reader. Chalk messages appeared throughout the school. There were discussion groups centered around judgment, tolerance and acceptance tied into the Civil Rights Movement history lessons and brainstorming individual ways to implement the lessons learned with the homeless and disabled. A girl's group discussed the negative effects of gossip and rumors and acted on that. All this and more has resulted in hundreds of Positive Referrals to the office and a marked improvement in school culture and moral. All this in a week! I wish you could all see the myriad of student messages, tweets, writings that the judges have.

Our 2nd Place recipient is Danielle Yarusevich, an art teacher at Pine Ridge Middle School. Danielle was a Champions of Learning Teacher of Distinction winner last Fall and became involved in the Federation's Butterflies of Hope and Remembrance Project with her students. She taught them about the children of Terezin Concentration Camp, the same age as her students but who are forever silenced. They read the book *I NEVER SAW ANOTHER BUTTERFLY* and researched the lives of those perished students, so much like them, and wanted to create personalized butterflies that turned out to have an emotional impact on many community members. These personalized butterflies were put on display at the Collier County South Regional Library. The display was only supposed to be at the library for the month of January, but due to the overwhelming community response, they are still there as I write this in March. We went to see the display at the library. They are so detailed, so compelling, that we witnessed visitors standing there with tears running down their faces, not wanting to move from the artwork so others could also see them. Danielle said that she has never had this kind of meaningful participation in a project. So many students were so focused and worried they were not adequately memorializing the children they were creating a butterfly for who no longer had a voice. They wanted to create a butterfly so special that the child would never be forgotten. They expressed to her that their art was the voice of that student and they wanted the butterfly to be perfect. This project was not only about understanding, acceptance and respect, but empowered these students to be responsible and stand up to injustice when and where they see it. If the display is still up, please go see it. The butterflies may also be at the Holocaust Museum.

And last, but certainly not least, I want to tell you about our 1st Place winner, a joint effort of Lorenzo Walker Technical High School's Media Specialist Vanessa Alvarez and Lianne Elliot, Lorenzo Walker's High School Reading Coach.

Last school year the district instituted a focus on Social Emotional Learning. Vanessa and Lianne were surprised when their Student Panorama result data indicated that many of their students felt disconnected from one another across all grade levels and technical areas. They decided to implement a Whole School Read and use it this year to build relationships and break down barriers between students. They based it on the book LETTERS TO THE LOST by Brigid Kemmerer where the main characters start exchanging letters in a graveyard, where the female character has been leaving letters for her deceased mother, and the male character starts writing back, even though they do not know each other. When the two characters realize each has been writing to someone whom they would not normally talk to in school, it causes them to re-evaluate the stereotypes they had in their heads. Vanessa and Lianne started a letter writing project pairing students in different grade levels as pen pals. Before knowing the identity of their pen pal, the younger students started asking the older ones for advice and sharing first week nerves and worries. Older students wrote back with reassurances. The letter writing continued a few more times before the pen pals got to meet each other. They were excited to put a name and face on their pen pals and make a new friend. After that they began reading the book in their Language Arts classes. Through discussions and activities, themes repeated those reflected the book: how we present to the outside world our inner self, breaking down stereotypes, reaching out in friendship to deal with difficult things like grief. Although race and religion were not specifically addressed, students began consistently talking about and actively respecting each other despite the existence of such differences. All students remarked about the respect that existed between them and wanted to have more time to know each other during the school year. They were able to creatively express their feelings about prejudice through talking, writing, and participating in a photography exhibit about judging someone based on stereotypes as well as many other impactful activities. They created podcasts highlighting friendships that were made during the pen pal exchange part, which was the most meaningful part for the students. Vanessa and Lianne submitted the podcasts along with actual student to student pen pal letters that were quite moving.

I am sure you share our gratitude to these fine educators who are making a difference!

Respectfully Submitted,  
Beth Povlow  
Chair, Stand Up for Justice