

'When he smiles, I smile': School community praises prize-winning teacher

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A group of students applaud their teacher, Michael B. Flynn, shown at left, during a program last week.

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SOUTHAMPTON - Michael B. Flynn, Massachusetts Teacher of the Year, walked inside the William Norris Elementary School at about 5:20 p.m., 10 minutes before his recognition party would start. It was gray, dark and rainy outside, shifting the event from an outdoor tent to the school cafeteria.

Inside, Principal William E. Collins, who had nominated Flynn for the honor, welcomed him with a smile. They shook hands before Flynn walked into the main office.

Cheryl Salomao, who has known Flynn since he started as a student teacher at Norris School 10 years ago, walked in the office.

"Your parents are here," Salomao told Flynn. "They're sitting in the front row. Theresa and the kids can sit in the front with them. Are they here yet? Did they come with you? The Board of Selectmen will come out first. Then you will go."

Flynn, 32, turned to the water cooler. He grabbed a paper cup, pulled the cooler's lever and slugged down his cup of water in one sip.

"This is craziness," Flynn, of Florence, said to Salomao.

But craziness is nothing new for Flynn. In fact, he often creates some craziness.

He sneaks up on people to scare them, tapes teachers' desk drawers shut and is known to leave surprises on computers he fixes - surprises like a 1980s rock star screen-saver, Salomao said. He is a practical joker, she added.

"He's famous for his laugh," Salomao said after the celebration. "After school when the kids have left you'll just hear this bellowing laugh down the hall."

And with a smile, a chuckle and a deep breath, Flynn put down the cup and headed for the main office door.

Meanwhile, the cafeteria was filling up. Music by The Doors and Santana was playing. Chrysanthemums decorated the stage, along with pumpkins and a cornstalk. In the back, a table of refreshments - drinks, chocolate chip cookies and a white-frosted cake - were picked up by various people in the audience, a crowd of Michael B. Flynn fans.

Creativity in the classroom

One was Ben Fitzpatrick, who was in Flynn's second-grade class last year.

"He is very inspiring," Ben said. "He gives us courage when you don't really think you can do it."

Ben felt less than courageous during the mealworm experiment, when the second-grade class observed and researched the mealworm's life cycle. Fitzpatrick did not like the worm's claws, and feared he would get bit if he touched one.

"I said it was scary, he (Flynn) said I would get through it," Fitzpatrick said before the ceremony started. "And I did."

The audience hushed as the principal walked up to the microphone, welcomed everyone and introduced Jess Dods, chairman of the Board of Selectmen, to begin the ceremony. Dods noted that the last time he was on that stage was when he graduated eighth grade in 1960.

"As a selectmen, I'm typically saying 'we don't have any money,' " Dods said. "But the good part of this job is when I can say that the Select Board unanimously voted for Oct. 11 to be the official Michael B. Flynn day."

With that, selectmen Mike Phelan and Ann Roy stood up as Dods handed Flynn a framed certificate of achievement signed by the board.

A group of 12 children sat on the cafeteria floor in front of the far right corner of the stage. A young boy rolled toward them on his wheeled sneakers. Two boys, one wearing glasses and the

other in a red shirt with black gym shorts, raised their fists high, cheering "Woo!" as Flynn shook Dods hand.

Flynn's colleagues ended the program with a musical performance to the song, "Teach your Children" by Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young.

Kevin Hodgson, a sixth-grade teacher at Norris, first met Flynn at his friend Bob Scalzo's wedding, where Flynn and his friend performed the opening act. Flynn was in a funk rock band at Westfield State College at the time.

"He's a great songwriter," Hodgson said. "He brings his guitar in and that whole creative side of him bleeds through to his teaching side."

Hodgson's sixth-grade class and Flynn's second-grade class collaborate together to make clay animation videos, somewhat similar to Gumby, Hodgson said. Besides working with Web cams and computer programs, students write scripts, add voice narration, and work with their art teacher to create the clay figures, Hodgson noted.

"When we (Flynn and Hodgson) said let's do Claymation together neither one of us had ever done it before and we were somewhat making it up as we were going along," Hodgson said. "Now we're helping other teachers build with technology."

Flynn's videos are popular among the students, but not as popular as the man behind them.

"Mr. Flynn smiles a lot and when he smiles I smile," Rowan Nadeau, a student in Flynn's second-grade class, said to the audience. "I think every kid should have him as a teacher."