

The art of teaching: Sewell retires from BVMS (4-28-21)



If you could have any job, what would it be?

This is the question that Martha (Marta) Sewell's husband, Graig, asked her almost 20 years ago. Her answer: Teacher.

"Then do it," Graig said.

And so, she did. When Sewell was 46 years old, she went back to school, and by 50, she landed her first—and only teaching job—as Brandon Valley Middle School's art teacher.

Despite having a variety of different jobs before teaching—paralegal, stay-at-home mom, business manager, HyVee—Sewell says this job captured her heart.

"I just love this," Sewell said. "It's so much stinkin' fun. They pay me to hang out with kids and make art. I won the lottery."

When she completed her teaching degree, Sewell began searching for positions in Wyoming, the Black Hills and other parts of the state. But then a position opened up at BVMS for an art teacher.

"We didn't have to sell our house, my kids went here, I knew people here, so this is home," Sewell said.

For the kids

Sewell says she loves teaching middle schoolers because of the safe, easygoing space she provides them with.

“I remember being this age, and it sucked,” Sewell said. “It was awful. So, I just want it to suck less. I just want to make it better so it’s not so tough. I like being the fun place. I like being the place where they can come let their hair down and be creative.”

The first nine out of her 15 years at Brandon Valley, Sewell spent half of her day at the high school teaching Art I and Photography.

“I’d see the kids from sixth through 12th grade, from the awkward age to going out into the world,” Sewell said.

Although she no longer gets to follow her students all the way through their high school journeys, she says they still come back to visit, and each year, she receives invitations from former students for graduation parties.

Even when Sewell was unable to see her students in person due to the COVID shutdown, she still strived to make sure the kids could be successfully creative from home.

“I came in here, and I stapled together, like, 183 sketchbooks and got them distributed to all the kids, so they all had at least that,” she said. “Then, we were painting with coffee, used whatever newspaper they had. I rounded up tons of magazines and set them out in the foyer so the kids could come get a magazine if they needed one.”

As for favorite projects she has her students do each year, pottery and self-portraits top the list.

Another key aspect of Sewell’s classroom is recognizing the potential in her students of how far they can go.

“Whenever I saw kids with talent, I’d ask them if they like math or science better,” Sewell said. “If they said math, I’d say, ‘How about engineering or architecture?’ because it’s not just all making art. Or, if they said science, I’d say, ‘How about surgery or chemistry?’ because it’s doing tiny things in small, tight areas.”

At least 14 former students have followed Sewell’s advice and entered into careers as surgeons or other avenues in the medical field.

Retired life

Although Sewell says it’ll be hard to go, she knows it’s time.

“Everybody says there comes a time when you just know you need to, and I just need to,” she said.

Sewell, however, is looking forward to plenty of quality time with her family.

Her three kids, Mathew, Rebecca and Allison, each have two children, so she has six grandchildren that she’s excited to spend more time with.

“Everybody says you should be busy in August—that the first day of school you should go on vacation or do something,” Sewell said. “I think I’ll be bouncing grandchildren that day. That’s what I’ll be doing.”

She's also looking forward to spending time with her husband of 39 years, Graig.

"It's a running joke because the kids say 'Ms. Sewell' and I always say, 'Mrs.—I'm happily married,'" Sewell said, laughing. "And then I'll add on—Mrs. I'm happily married to my best friend, Graig, for 39 years.' I keep adding on, and the kids finally have the mantra down, and it's hilarious."

Despite inevitably missing the students, Sewell has a wide variety of hobbies she plans to fill her time with, including reading, print making, knitting, crocheting, riding horses, photography and hunting and fishing.

As for what she'll miss the most after her final school year at Brandon Valley ends? The kids, she says, without a doubt.

But, Sewell will also miss the district as a whole and the camaraderie.

"I'm going to miss the other teachers," Sewell said. "You know, you get to be so close; you see them every day."

"This room," Sewell added, gesturing to the art room, "is like a second home. I'm just going to miss it a lot."

And, for Sewell, Brandon has been "the best place on the planet to teach. Seriously."