

Family liaison to be honored as district's School Related Employee of the Year

As the family liaison at a high-needs school, Whitney Davis has a unique perspective on the challenges facing the children and families she serves.

Davis weighed less than three pounds when she was born prematurely, and battled for her life from the beginning. She required years of intensive medical treatment and therapy, including a shunt in her brain, and it was expected she would suffer permanent disabilities. Her health hardships were complicated by growing up in a single-parent household where money was tight.



But she and her family kept fighting, and today she is a success story and a role model for the students and families who's lives she touches every day as the family liaison at the Rawlings Center for the Fine Arts.

"I was in an ESE (Exceptional Student Education) class in elementary school, and I tell the students and their parents that being an ESE student doesn't mean you can't learn," she said. "It just means you need extra help. I tell them I was there myself."

"Ms. Whitney has the gift of understanding the most difficult and struggling students. They feel seen and valued by her," said Rawlings principal Dr. Stella Arduser. "She also helps educators see the brilliance in our children just like people throughout her life have done for her. She never saw or thought of herself as being disabled."

As a family liaison, Davis collaborates with the administration and staff to develop interventions and service plans for high-needs students and their families. Besides the wraparound services offered at school, she provides them with information on services available in the community and helps them access those services. She even keeps her office stocked floor-to-ceiling with clothing, shoes, snacks and other donated supplies.

"My heart goes out to all children and families who are experiencing things like homelessness and hunger," said Davis. "I try to make sure they have what they need, because I know what it's like to go through some of those things."

Davis' efforts also include greeting students and family members every day, working alongside a student in the classroom who is struggling to understand a lesson, or calling parents if a child is absent to find out if there's something they need to have that child in school.

"She goes above and beyond to make sure we reach and teach," said Arduser. "This is her life's work, and the troubles she faced since birth could not stop her from doing that work."

Davis is still not 'stopping.' She's currently working on her bachelor's degree in early childhood education. Her goal is to have her own classroom, where she can continue to make a difference in the lives of children.

For her commitment and her willingness to go above and beyond her job description to support students and families, Davis has been selected as Alachua County Public Schools' 2025 School-Related Employee of the Year. She and 45 other outstanding employees will be recognized at the district's annual School-Related Employee of the Year celebration on April 24. Davis, Arduser and other guests will speak, and all the honorees will be presented with gifts donated by the community.

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