

Teacher working with special needs students named Alachua County Teacher of the Year

While working toward her master's degree in education at the University of Florida, Alachua County Public Schools' new Teacher of the Year Monica Benson requested an internship at Sidney Lanier School, which serves students with significant disabilities. She says her choice surprised people.



"I'll never forget the response and the facial expressions I received," she said. "But once I started working with our student population, I could never imagine myself anywhere else."

Ten years later, Benson is still at Lanier. Although most of her current students are high schoolers, she works with students of all ages and with a wide variety of needs, including those with significant emotional and behavioral disorders.

"It takes a special person to love, teach, care and advocate for students with profound disabilities," said Lanier principal Dr. Buddy Kamman, who has worked with Benson for nine years. "Monica is one of those rare people who is not only a fantastic teacher but is a kind soul who is a master at being a special educator."

Benson was among forty teachers, one from each of the district's schools, who were honored recently at the annual Robert W. Hughes Teacher of the Year celebration, which is named after the former Superintendent who established the recognition program. Hundreds of fellow teachers, school and district staff members, students, parents, business representatives and other community members attended the event, which was hosted by The Education Foundation for Alachua County Public Schools.

"It's an honor for The Foundation to host this event," said executive director Tis Brock-Paul. "We are committed to recognizing Alachua County's teachers and uplifting the entire teaching profession."

Each of the forty honorees received a \$500 check and gifts provided by many sponsors throughout the county, including premier sponsors Florida Credit Union, SWI Photography and Cox Communications.

"It was such a wonderful celebration," said Superintendent Dr. Kamela Patton, who joined the district in November and attended the Teacher of the Year event for the first time. "I'm so impressed by the outpouring of support from the community for our honorees and the many other outstanding teachers they represent."

Also receiving special recognition at the celebration were elementary-school finalist Vanessa Lind, a second-grade teacher at Glen Springs Elementary School, and middle-school finalist Natalie Watkins, a 7th grade math teacher at Ft. Clarke Middle School.

During her remarks at the event, Benson commented on the fact that the mascot for Sidney Lanier School is a unicorn.

"I learned from a very wise principal that a group of unicorns is called a 'blessing,'" she said. "Our students are the biggest blessing in my life."

Benson will now go on to represent Alachua County Public Schools in the Florida Teacher of the Year program.

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