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2019 Annual Dinner Honorees

Melanie Knowles

Ask anyone who has worked with Melanie Knowles and they'll tell you the same thing: she's one of the most dedicated teachers around. She is often the last one to leave at night and can be seen working on Sundays. Over the years she has garnered respect from not only her fellow teachers, but from her students as well.

"Ms. Knowles has the nickname 'mom' for a reason," says Denver JDS junior Shira Fox. "She is always willing to listen, and she can solve *any* problem."

Melanie first began teaching at Denver Jewish Day School's Upper Division (then Rocky Mountain Hebrew Academy - RMHA) as a science teacher in 1984-85. In August 1990, she came on full time in the science department; in fact, she *was* the entire science department. Since then she has taught biology, chemistry, physical science, physics, and tzedek track ethics courses. She is currently the Upper Division's STEM coordinator, chairing both the math and science departments.

"She'll be there as late as she needs to be and she'll make herself available at any time," says former Upper Division Principal Bryan Hay. "She is among a handful of the brightest and most committed teachers I have ever known, and has a special ability to help support and inspire students for whom learning does not come easily."

During faculty meetings, Melanie would often knit, which took Bryan Hay some time to realize that the more she would knit, the better focused she would be during the meetings. Over the years, she's even passed on her passion for knitting to some of her students.

Just because Melanie teaches science doesn't mean she doesn't connect that learning to other subjects. In her lessons, she continually creates interdisciplinary learning with the confluence of science and Judaic studies — so much so that since December of 2004 she has helped to chaperone every year of the school's Hebrew Immersion Program (HIP) in Israel for 10th graders. Each year she gives of herself beyond the walls of the classroom, giving up her own winter break to spend time in Israel keeping the tenth graders safe and happy. Volunteering for this role for 14 years, she has developed a keen understanding for how to navigate the interpersonal relationships of high schoolers.

“It’s the interaction with the kids, and specifically our kids, that makes this such a great place to have a career,” says Melanie.

Melanie has coordinated the school science fair and mentored middle and high school students. Her students have been nominated to compete as finalists at the Colorado State Science and Engineering Fair 23 out of the last 25 years. In the winter of 2005, she attended the International Science and Engineering Fair (ISEF) with two of her students (Libby Boscoe, Class of 2007 and Shane Kleinstein, Class of 2007) who had studied head and neck cancer lines in a laboratory at the University of Colorado.

Often, even after her students graduate, they come back for college help in science classes or to simply check in and say hello. She says that Facebook has been an invaluable tool in helping with lab reports and final exam questions during the wee hours of the morning.

“One of my greatest joys as an educator is seeing kids learn and, in particular, introducing them to a scientific understanding of our world.”

Melanie received her undergraduate degree in chemistry from Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh and is a die-hard Pittsburgh Steelers fan. She moved to Colorado for graduate study, switching from chemistry to education after one year. She was recognized for her 18 years of service to the school in May 2007 and for her 25 years of service to the school in May 2014.

When she’s not teaching, helping her students, or supervising a class trip to Israel (or Durango, or Santa Fe, or Seattle), Melanie can be found reading, knitting and playing mah jongg.