



News Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2025

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Derby Public Schools I Make A Difference Award Winners Announced at Board of Education Meeting on February 24

Heidi Richert, staff, and Jeanetta Denson, volunteer, are the February recipients of the I Make A Difference Award.

This month's Staff I Make A Difference Award winner is Heidi Richert, Choir Teacher at Derby Middle School. Heidi Richert has dedicated 30 years of exceptional teaching in her role as a music educator with Derby Public Schools. In the inaugural year of the new program for students with low-incidence disabilities at Derby Middle School, Heidi has shown tremendous skill and passion in meeting student needs.

Heidi effectively integrated musical elements into lessons for students with low-incidence disabilities, having neurotypical peers model behaviors for students with significant disabilities. This fostered an inclusive learning environment where all students learned together. Heidi skillfully used movement-based activities and implemented universal design for learning to ensure that each student could participate. Her thoughtful scaffolding approach to the learning process, allowed students to work on one element before building upon it with the next. Allowing every student to access the content in a meaningful way.

Heidi thoughtfully dedicated a portion of her summer to researching and preparing the materials and methods necessary to teach an entirely new group of students she had never worked with before. She approached this with strong initiative, ensuring she was fully equipped to support them from day one. Her genuine passion for working with this group is evident in everything she does. Despite being new to teaching students with low-incidence disabilities, Heidi has demonstrated the expertise and skill typically found in educators with years of experience in this field.

Heidi is a tremendous asset to Derby Middle School providing opportunities to all her students, including having her honor choir perform at the KMEA inservice later this week and taking her Men's Choir last month to perform with 500 other students from across Kansas. You may also recall from this school year that Heidi was surprised as one of three outstanding music educators recognized by the South Central District of KMEA for their exceptional contributions to music education. This year, our educators swept all three of SCKMEA's prestigious awards with Heidi being recognized as their Middle School Music Educator of the Year.

This month's Volunteer I Make A Difference Award winner is Jeanetta Denson, parent volunteer at Oaklawn Elementary. Jeanetta Denson has dedicated countless hours as a parent volunteer at Oaklawn, where she plays an essential role in supporting both students and staff. From assisting during lunchtime to working

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one-on-one with students in the classroom to help them master their alphabet and sight words, Jeanetta's presence is felt throughout the school.

Jeanetta's commitment goes far beyond the classroom. She and her family are consistently involved in every event Oaklawn hosts. They actively encourage others to join in, fostering a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere that strengthens the school community. Jeanetta and her family are committed to ensuring that all students have the resources and support they need to succeed—ensuring no one is left behind. During school field trips, Jeanetta and her family make sure each student has snacks and water, even providing water bottles for every kindergarten student on one of the trips.

Students light up when they see Jeanetta, whether they are showing her their progress with letters, numbers, or words, or leaving the classroom after receiving her words of encouragement. The positive influence she has on them is evident. She inspires them to do their best and fosters a sense of pride in their accomplishments. Kerisa Brown, Kindergarten Teacher, shared, "Jeanetta is a kind, caring, loving, extraordinary woman that puts her heart and soul into making Oaklawn Elementary a truly enriching, memorable, and positive place to be." A true testament to her character and impact.

Last December, Jeanetta and her family gifted Ms. Brown's kindergarten class a memorable holiday project. They donated wood for students to create snowmen, with each piece cut to match each student's height, with the year and their names burned into the wood. This thoughtful gesture gave the families a keepsake they will treasure for years to come.

Jeanetta's compassion, attention to detail and dedication are evident through her outstanding volunteerism in the Oaklawn community.



Pictured: *(Pictured left to right)* Jeanetta Denson and Heidi Richert

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