



News Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 25, 2025

For more information contact:

Katie Carlson • Director of Communications • (316) 788-8427

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

Haylee Nickel, staff, and Rod Wachholtz and Genev Reed, volunteers, are the November recipients of the I Make A Difference Award.

This month's Staff I Make A Difference Award winner is Haylee Nickel, Kindergarten Teacher at Park Hill Elementary. Haylee brings joy, compassion and a strong commitment to her students each and every day. As a first-year teacher, and a former Park Hill student herself and Derby High School alum of the class of 2020, Haylee has returned to the place where her own educational journey began. After completing the majority of her student teaching at Park Hill and subbing for the district, stepping into this role has been especially meaningful, and she has embraced it with heart, enthusiasm and a high level of dedication.

What truly sets Haylee apart is the remarkable personal connection she builds with every single one of her students. Taylor Stone, a Special Education Paraprofessional, shared, "She is a great role model to anyone who aspires to be a teacher one day. This is my second year at Park Hill and I've never seen a teacher have as great of personal relationship with each student as she does." She takes time out of her day to ensure that each student feels seen, supported and valued by meeting individual needs with patience and a genuine love for teaching.

Her classroom radiates positivity. Haylee greets each day with an upbeat spirit and a smile that makes students and staff feel instantly welcomed. She is deeply involved in her students' growth and celebrates their successes, big and small. Her presence is described as a true light in Park Hill, bringing encouragement and kindness to everyone around her.

In addition to teaching, she is also a Tumbling and Stunt coach, and Haylee is often a visible presence at many of her students' events outside of the classroom. Her dedication, her ability to form meaningful relationships and her joyful approach to teaching have already made a lasting impact on her students and school community.

This month's volunteer I Make A Difference Award winners are Rod Wachholtz and Genev Reed, senior greeters at Swaney Elementary. Rod and Genev bring warmth, encouragement and a joyful start to the day for every student who walks through Swaney's doors. As the friendly faces welcoming Wildcats each Wednesday morning, they do more than greet students; they set the tone for a positive and uplifting day with their kindness, smiles and genuine care.

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Derby Public Schools strives to create a safe and inclusive culture and a comprehensive educational experience that propels students toward their fullest potential so they can positively impact their community.

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Their weekly tradition of standing at the front doors has become something students and staff look forward to. With a simple “good morning,” a warm smile or a few encouraging words, Rod and Genev ensure that every child feels noticed, valued and welcomed into their school community. This small but powerful moment of connection makes all the difference, helping students carry confidence and positivity with them into the classroom.

What makes Rod and Genev truly special is their dedication to being present. Joel Addis, Swaney Elementary Principal, shared, “Sometimes, the most meaningful contributions are the simplest ones, being present, kind and helping everyone feel welcome. Swaney would not be the same without them.” Their impact lingers longer after the morning drop-off, echoing through Swaney’s halls throughout the day.

Their commitment to encouraging and uplifting students is a true gift and they are appreciated by the entire Swaney community.



Pictured: *(Pictured left to right)* Haylee Nickel, Genev Reed and Rod Wachholtz

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