

Lafayette's Teacher of the Year

By Cathy Tyson



Erin Caldwell, Lafayette's Teacher of the Year

Photo Cathy Tyson

Erin Caldwell, an energetic Special Education teacher at Springhill Elementary School is the Lafayette School District's Teacher of the Year nominee. She was nominated by school administrators, but had to prepare all of the required paperwork to be included in the county-wide competition. This included answering several essay questions and getting letters of recommendation from members of the community.

One of those letters summarized especially well just what Caldwell does for her students. Jocelyn Schneider Dunbar writes, "Under the wise and humble tutelage of Erin Caldwell, our son learned to love to read, do math, adore history, spell phonetically, study in groups and make friends again. It is in 'Downtown' (her classroom) under the kind and loving guidance of Erin Caldwell where he learned that having spe-

cial needs wasn't 'special' at all. He learned to be independent, respect others, cooperate on the playground and grew to understand what it means to be truly loved and adored by a teacher. She is a woman who inspires our special children to do extraordinary things."

Caldwell graduated from UC Berkeley and went right to San Francisco State to get her Teaching Credential. "I was a psychology major, so I got this interview (and ultimately a job) working at a day treatment center, with therapists, psychologists and social workers. I thought this is right up my alley and I get to teach at the same time! I was completely unqualified, but they ended up paying for me to go back and get my Special Ed Credential."

It's been a whirlwind for her ever since: "I finished my cre-

dential, got married in August and began teaching that fall." Two years later she had her first son, two years after that second son was born, both births were in the fall and she came back at Christmas break. A few years later, a daughter joined the family.

After spending the first five years of her career at a private school, the next seven at a public school in the Mt. Diablo school district, a position became available at Springhill. Coincidentally her youngest was starting kindergarten there that year. "It was the first time all my kids were in the same school and I was with them. That was nine years ago."

"I love my class. Each child brings something different and unique to the group. We laugh a lot. I truly believe that learning should be fun, even if it isn't easy for you to learn. I like to make up games to help the children learn the curriculum. When they master a concept, it is such a source of joy for me," Caldwell says reflecting on the best part of her job. She teaches kids who are chronologically in the 4th and 5th grades, but not cognitively in the 4th and 5th grades.

Caldwell would like to thank her Principal, Bruce Wodhams, "He's been so supportive, letting me do whatever I feel is necessary and in the best interest of my class. We are our own world in 'Downtown,' and he understands and supports us. There is a level of mutual respect and trust between the administration and me."