

Rules of Engagement

Moraga School District's 2014-15 Teacher of the Year

By Diane Claytor



Rheem Elementary School third-grade teacher Ann Ralph in class.

Visitors to Ann Ralph's Moraga classroom shouldn't be surprised to see her 23 third graders stomping their feet and swinging their arms to some jazzy music. Or, if they arrive during "genius hour," visitors might have the opportunity to hear one of the students say "I'm a genius at ..."

presentation on what makes people ticklish, or how to teach a parakeet to talk. The kids get to choose something they really want to learn about. "I want the kids to come here, learn and have fun. I want them to leave every day wanting to come back the next day." Ralph said.

With five younger siblings, Ralph has undoubtedly been teaching since she was a child. And with seven older siblings, the Orinda native was obviously being taught from a very young age. "It was part of our family dynamic to show the younger kids how to do things ...

Moving back to the Lamorinda area to be closer to her large, extended family and raise her own children, Ralph returned to teaching in 1996, joining the staff at Moraga's Donald Rheem Elementary School. For 13 years, she taught fifth grade, which she loved. "I loved the rich curriculum, the challenges. It was so exciting to teach math, science, U.S. history," she explained. When an opening for a third grade teacher presented itself several years ago, Ralph decided to make the move.

room, know it's going to be fun but also know that I have high expectations, they'll always rise to the occasion."

Ralph is one of four teachers from the Lamorinda area nominated to represent their districts in the 2014-15 Contra Costa County Teacher of the Year competition. According to Rheem's principal, Elaine Frank, Ralph is the "perfect choice" for Moraga's Teacher of the Year. She is "well respected by students, parents and colleagues. She consistently designs lessons that promote student engagement ... has infectious energy ... and diligently challenges students to think independently and creatively."

"Teaching would be far less exciting for me if I didn't always try to find ways to engage the kids," Ralph said. She spends hours researching, reading blogs, learning what works for other teachers. As Frank observed, "Ralph has a constant desire to learn more, take risks, improve. ... She is enthusiastic about new programs, methodologies and systems to promote deeper learning."

Ralph says she "loves trying new things. ... If I was the kind of teacher that did the same things every year, I probably would have retired by now."

Frank noted that Ralph's fearlessness at trying new things is

most impressive. "She knows there will be bumps along the way," she stated, "but she embraces the challenges as growth opportunities."

Ralph is extremely humbled by the Teacher of the Year nomination, noting that she sincerely appreciates the recognition but is fully aware "that I couldn't accomplish this without my grade level colleagues, the support of the parents, principal, the entire staff."

Contra Costa County began recognizing outstanding teachers in 1972, establishing the Teacher of the Year program, which is directed by the Contra Costa County Office of Education. It is open to all K-12 teachers in public and private schools. The selection process involves both in-person observations of the nominees by a committee of education specialists followed by a personal interview with each of the district's Teacher of the Year representatives.

Lamorinda Weekly will feature Lafayette School District representative Olivia Vann of Springhill Elementary School in an upcoming issue. The Acalanes Union High School District Educator of the Year, Jane Kelson, was featured in the March 12 issue of Lamorinda Weekly and the Orinda School District Teacher of the Year representative, Trisha Newhart, was featured in the May 7 issue.

Are We Overpowered?

By Cathy Tyson



Antenna tower at Saint Mary's College as seen from the Lafayette-Moraga trail. Photo Andy Scheck

Are cell phones and cell towers dangerous? Is there reputable research about negative health effects of both? What exactly is electromagnetic radiation? Concerned residents have a chance to hear about these topics at an upcoming event at the Lafayette Library. W.I.S.E., Wireless Education and Safety Education is sponsoring "Overpowered," a presentation on the health effects of cell phones, cell towers, smart meters and other devices. Author Martin Blank, Ph.D., has studied the subject for more than 30 years and earned his doctorate from Columbia University. He'll be speaking at the event about the biologic effects of wireless and electromagnetic devices and how to keep our families and communities safer while using this valuable technology.

Also featured will be special guests California State Senator Mark DeSaulnier and KTVU Health and Science Editor John Fowler.

Organizer and sponsor of the event Ellie Marks, executive director of the grassroots non-profit organization, the California Brain Tumor Association feels the public is not informed about these potentially dangerous technologies, and she feels there is compelling data on the adverse health effects of electromagnetic radiation.

Marks became involved when her husband Alan was diagnosed with brain cancer a few years ago. "The public deserves the right to

know that the fine print in cell phone manuals tells one to never hold the phone to the body," she says. "Also, cell towers do not belong near schools."

The cell tower issue has been a hot topic in Lafayette recently with concern over a potential AT&T cell tower at St. Perpetua church and school. The event is scheduled at 6:30 p.m. May 29 in the Lafayette Library Community Hall. Admission is free but seating is limited. Organizers ask that you register your seat at Overpowered.brownpertickets.com.

In related news, Susan JunFish, director of Parents for a Safer Environment is concerned about chemical use at the Acalanes Union High School District. There is a meeting scheduled on May 21 at the District offices to discuss the issue, which the public is welcome to attend. "We care about student safety, along with maintaining the taxpayer's investment," said Steve Fishbaugh, AUHSD director of maintenance.

AUHSD has a pesticide application notification that lets parents and students know what may be used in and around schools, for students who are sensitive to chemicals. Upon request, the district will supply information at least 72 hours before application. The herbicide RoundUp Pro with the active ingredient glyphosphate and the insecticide Nisus Terro-Pco Liquid Ant Bait with an active ingredient of Borax is used - both are categorized as Category III (least toxic) materials.

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