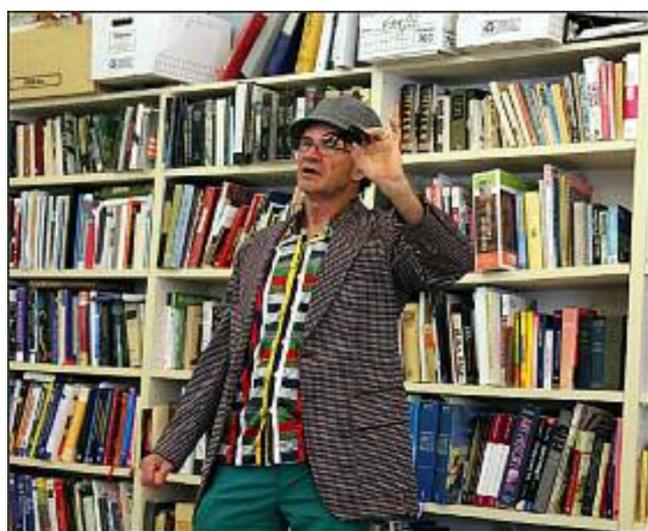


Miramonte Teacher One of Four 2015-16 Contra Costa County Teacher of the Year Finalists

By Diane Claytor



Miramonte High School teacher Paul Fitzgerald

Photo provided

Miramonte High School history and psychology teacher Paul Fitzgerald has been teaching for 40 years. That's 40 years of reading and grading the papers and tests of teenagers (with their hormones and angst), and working with parents and administrators. You would think, after all this time, he would be burned out, tired and ready to walk away. You would be wrong! Fitzgerald, one of four finalists for the 2015-16 Contra Costa County Teacher of the Year award, appears to be as enthusiastic and passionate about teaching today as he likely was 40 years ago – maybe even more so.

The Bay Area native and UC Berkeley graduate has spent the last 18 years at Miramonte. Prior to that, Fitzgerald taught in Denver, Chicago and Costa Mesa, Calif. He learned early in his career that high schoolers, no matter how unmotivated they may appear, really want to do well. "You have to reach them where they are," Fitzgerald explained. "If kids think they have a chance of doing better, they're going to take it. They do care. Not every student is in the same place at the same time so we, as teachers, have to find where they are and learn how to reach them. I read about a school where no student receives a failing grade. Their report card simply states 'not there yet.' If someone flunks a test, it just means they haven't passed it yet."

Fitzgerald adopted these philosophies and ran with them. "What this means to me is that I, as a teacher,

have to find a way to get that student to better understand the material. I set the bar very high in my classes," Fitzgerald said, "and I give my students a lot of opportunities to reach it." If a student needs to rewrite an essay three times with Fitzgerald reviewing the first two drafts, that's fine with him. If a student needs to meet with him during lunch or after school to work on or finish an assignment, Fitzgerald is there. "If they're willing to put in the extra time and effort, I'm willing to be there for them. I want them to find ways to succeed," he noted. "My ultimate goal is to teach them how to learn."

Richard DuFour, an "education guru," according to Fitzgerald, and one of the principals Fitzgerald worked under in Chicago, authored "Professional Learning Communities at Work," where he advises teachers to "focus on learning rather than teaching ... and hold yourself accountable for results." Fitzgerald bought into this concept immediately. "Just giving a kid back a test doesn't tell him/her anything," he said. "Every teacher should look at the bottom line. What did I do wrong? What could I do better?"

Following this theory resulted in improved test scores for his kids; while teaching in Chicago, Fitzgerald received national recognition for the increased AP test scores of his students. He was invited by the College Board to give workshops to other AP European history teachers and his curriculum became a national model

for this subject area. He still leads these workshops during the summer.

At Miramonte, Fitzgerald teaches AP European history to sophomores and psychology to seniors. Sarah Rockwood, editor of Miramonte's student newspaper, wrote, "Fitzgerald's trademark of continuously finding connections between the past and present, and illustrating how the former always impacts the latter, has made his class especially intriguing to students." And Miramonte Principal Julie Parks said that Fitzgerald "is everything you look for in a teacher: collaborative, innovative and powerfully student-centered. He is an inspiration to students and staff alike."

"There are so many outstanding teachers in this community," Fitzgerald said. "They are hardworking, idealistic and collaborative. I am truly honored to have been nominated for this very prestigious award."

Contra Costa County began recognizing outstanding teachers in 1972, establishing the Teachers of the Year program, which is directed by the 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. Two winners will be announced in September; they will then compete in the state Teacher of the Year program. The three other finalists included Dawn Foote (Nunn Elementary School, Brentwood), Maria McClain (Deer Valley High School, Antioch) and Kate Perry (St. Patrick-St. Vincent High School, Vallejo).

The following Lamorinda teachers were nominated by their districts to be 2015-16 Contra Costa County Teacher of the Year representatives: Vickie Hilty, Orinda Union School District, Sleepy Hollow Elementary; Juanita McSweeney, Lafayette School District, Happy Valley Elementary; and Don Read, Moraga School District, Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School.



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