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Curtain Call for Lafayette Elementary Teacher

By Cathy Dausman



Teacher Karen Noel looks at photos of past Lafayette Elementary School performances. Photo Cathy Dausman

After 25 years teaching and an equal number of years directing Lafayette Elementary School plays, second-grade teacher Karen Noel is taking a curtain call.

But while Noel leaves the classroom the end of this school year, she has agreed to stay on as director for the school's annual musical. That's likely welcome news to the younger students - their turn to participate in the long-running Lafayette Elementary musical tradition comes as they enter fourth or fifth grade. This year's musical, "Oliver!" involved 107 students in four shows, May 30 and 31.

Noel came to the program, which began in 1981, as a new hire in 1988. She recalls being told off-handedly, "Oh, by the way, you'll also be directing the school musical."

When Lafayette Elementary served a K-6 population, the musical was known as the sixth-grade play. Rehearsals were incorporated into afternoon curriculum three days a week; it was their only music instruction. The program, which is now known as the Lafayette Elementary Drama Club, incorporates fourth and fifth graders who rehearse after school for one hour four days a week. Rehearsals begin in early March, and performance dates are set for late May or early June.

Noel said today's program would not be a success without the "huge parent help" and the assistance of music teacher Susan Comber. For her classroom and extra-curricular dedication, Noel received a school district certificate of appreciation. Lafayette Elementary students also placed a plaque with her name on it on the backstage prop room door.

Performing arts runs in the Noel family. Noel's grandfather was a symphony conductor in Oakland; her father was a self-taught jazz buff. Her son, Adam Noel, is head of the music department for the Moraga School District, and teaches instrumental music at Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School. Daughter Leslie is a private voice teacher, and founder and president of the Peter Pan Foundation, a philanthropic musical theater organization.

Noel spent her entire teaching career at Lafayette Elementary, mostly in second grade classrooms. She considers herself "best friends" with the school staff and student enrollment. "We have such a family here," she said.

Her message to teachers is "embrace the curriculum, but teach from your heart." To parents, Noel advises: "Love your children enough to say 'no!'"

Being retired probably won't register with her until next fall, Noel said. Ironically, she scheduled a cruise with husband Harry Noel which departs the very day school opens in September. Nevertheless, an encore performance is in the works. After the cruise Noel plans to return to the classroom as a volunteer. She will also reprise her role as Cat in the Hat for the school's Green Eggs & Ham Day, and plans to work at the school's "Squid Day."

A cookies and punch reception (the menu was at Noel's request) for current and former students was held June 4 in the Lafayette Elementary School multipurpose room.

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