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Lamorinda Teachers Make the Grade Three Nominated for County Teacher of the Year

Cathy Dausman

Terry Miller, Los Perales Photos Cathy Dausman

Three Lamorinda teachers with more than 60 years of combined classroom experience were named semifinalists of the Contra Costa County Office of Education's Teacher of the Year award. They are Mette Thallaug, Lafayette's Burton Valley Elementary, Terry Miller, Los Perales Elementary in Moraga, and Kim Burris, Orinda Unified School District. The remaining teachers represent Martinez and San Ramon Valley school districts.

Three of these five teachers will be selected as finalists; the top finalist will be named County Representative in September, and will compete for the title of California Teacher of the Year. Finding a favorite among the three Lamorinda teachers, however, is like asking someone to choose just one ice cream flavor or name a favorite aunt; it's not that easy.

Each teacher submitted six application essays and was observed in the classroom by a team of four: two teachers and two business partners. Beyond the paperwork and classwork, the trio shined in their displays of district loyalty, a love of both classroom and students, and a sincere appreciation for administrative and parental support.

Reading Specialist Mette Thallaug has spent 22 years in education, and 20 years in the Lafayette School District.

She spent the last six years at Burton Valley, and views technology as a boon to young readers' skills.

Thallaug admitted the application process was "a lot of work," but that it also allowed for plenty of self-reflection. She said her kindergarten students were more distracted by the classroom visitors than she was during her observation time-teachers get used to that, she said. Thallaug knows there are "many" good teachers, and that the program seeks to find someone who will be a good spokesperson for education.

Terry Miller has taught for 21 years. She began her career in Stockton, and then moved to the Moraga school district 15 years ago. She's been at Los Perales the entire time, and is earning a master's degree in the Teacher Leadership program at Saint Mary's College. Miller previously taught first grade and now teaches kindergarten. She has her students to think of their classmates as "kinder friends" and speaks warmly about her Bear Cub (class mascot) school family. She loves to team teach with small groups and finds she is constantly refining curriculum. Miller's former first-grade students may know her as "Ms. Jones."

Kim Burris is a Literacy Coach for all five Orinda schools and has taught "only in Orinda" for 19 years. She began by job-sharing a third-grade teaching position that lasted 13 years, and allowed her to experience what she called "the best of every world."

Orinda had multiple literacy coaches for various grade levels when Burris first started working; she is now their only literacy coach. She revels in the opportunity she has to teach, observe and meet with students and parents, and said her job is "never the same every year." And she quickly credited everyone else involved in teaching. "I am only who I am because of a fabulous team," she said.

The California Teacher of the Year program began in 1972 and is open to pre-kindergarten through 12th-grade teachers in public and private schools. Contra Costa County's public schools alone employ nearly 8,000 teachers to educate 169,000 students. The first year's county winner was Joseph Davis, Jr. from the Acalanes Union High School District. Since then, four other teachers from Contra Costa County have been named state finalists.

New Campolindo Principal

In other Lamorinda education news, the Acalanes Union High School District Governing Board approved the appointment of John Walker as Campolindo High School principal effective July 1. Walker was assistant principal at San Ramon Valley High School; he also taught at St. Mary's College High School in Berkeley. He replaces the retiring Carol Kitchens. A special welcome/reception is planned May 10 from 7:30 a.m. to 8:30 a.m. at the Campolindo library.



Kim Burris, Orinda School District



Mette Thallaug, Burton Valley Elementary Reading Specialist

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