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SOMEONE YOU SHOULD KNOW

Teacher retires after 33 years, 12 songs

by JILL SCHMELZER

It was one of those kismet moments as kindergarten teacher Norma Gentner was searching for a song to teach her pupils about science concepts.

"I couldn't find one, but then a song entered my life, and I became a composer," the former Sweet Home School District teacher said. "It happens to a lot of composers or lyricists. A problem leads to the creation of songs."

Gentner, who retired this past spring, wore many hats during her 33-year tenure as an educator. Not only was she a kindergarten teacher and composer, but she also taught enrichment and special education.

She wrote 12 songs, which she used in her own classrooms, as well as published in books. They are used as teaching tools across the United States, Gentner said, recalling an experience her former principal had in Los Angeles.



Norma Gentner

"She was in California at a conference, and they (the attendees) had a lunch break.

All the buzz of the dining room was about my work," Gentner said, noting that her former boss made sure to tell everyone at the conference that Gentner taught at her school.

Gentner authored such songs as "Frog in a Log," which is about the cycle of life; "Munch, Munch, Munch" chronicles a caterpillar's life; and "Bear Facts" teaches youth how bears adapt to changes.

"It is a great vehicle in helping children to learn," she said. "They can pick up the books and easily read them through song. Kids are fascinated with science anyway."

She recalled an experience she had with one of her former kindergarten pupils who told her how much he enjoyed her "Did You Know" song.

"There's nothing like a 5-year-old, who in such a pure sense, says they love something you've created," Gentner said.

According to Gentner, the songs act as facilitators for teaching youth about science.

"I really am just so keyed in to science. I love the problems the students come up with, but I also come up with questions about the world," she said of why her works focus on the natural world. "It's an adventure we are all on."

She entered some of her students in national science competitions, where one group was a finalist for the presidential award and another won second place in the nation for technological design.

"I am just hooked on science, and I think kids are, too," she said.

She also mentored a young authors' club during the time she was an enrichment teacher for grades 2 through 5. She guided 15 students to become published authors in the national youth magazine, "Creative Kids."

"In enrichment K-2, it's more they are learning to read, whereas the intermediate students are reading to learn."

This past year, Gentner received the Heart Award, which is an honor given to a Sweet Home School District teacher who shows an exemplary dedication to child education.

The award is named after district school psychologist Teri Gamin, who was dedicated to helping the youth with special needs become successful, Gentner noted.

"She was very passionate about what she did," Gentner said. "It is such an honor to be compared to Teri."

She noted that being nominated by her peers to be the recipient of the highest award in the district humbled her.

"A teacher is not a job; it's who you are," Gentner said, noting that while she just retired in June, she is finding it difficult to not notice various environments that could be used during classroom lessons.

"My mind continues to notice things that could support teachers and kids," she said.

Gentner's other works include: "B-B-B-ats," "Busy Bees," "Dig a Dinosaur," "Gravity," "Rappin' Heart Rhyme," "Save a Tree for Me," "The Predator," "What Hatches from an Egg" and "Winter's Gift."

The list may not stop here, though. Gentner said she has been working on a mathematics chapter book for youths, titled "More is less, or is it?"

"I thought, 'Wow, you really can get more for less if you bide the right time,'" she said.

If you have a suggestion for someone to feature in this column, send it to Jessica L. Finch, Amherst Bee Associate Editor, P.O. Box 150, Buffalo, NY 14231, call 204-4914 or e-mail jfinch@beeneews.com.