

Teacher receives visit from her own favorite teacher

PEWAUKEE SCHOOLS

By Lauren Anderson

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PEWAUKEE — Nearly four decades ago, Karen Vega was in fifth grade with her favorite teacher of all time.

Vega was a student at Waukesha's former Pleasant Hill Elementary School in Dwayne O'Reilly's classroom — a place where learning was fun and from which Vega would eventually draw inspiration when she became a teacher.

Now a sixth-grade teacher at Pewaukee's Horizon Elementary School, Vega still talks up Mr. Reilly to her students as the best teacher she's ever had.

"I tell them my philosophy of teaching is to make sure that you learn but also have you enjoy learning, having learning be fun and memorable," she said. "And that's what my favorite teacher, Mr. O'Reilly, would do."

On a recent whim, Reilly reached out to O'Reilly on Facebook, 38 years after being in his class.

"I thought, I wonder if he'd even remember me," she said. "So I friend requested him and he accepted."

She proceeded to message him, thanking him for inspiring her to pursue teaching. O'Reilly — now a decade into retirement — offered to visit her classroom.

Last week, the two had a reunion for the first time in 38 years — and, while much had changed, some things had stayed the same. Mr. O'Reilly delivered a math lesson and did what he does best.

"He shared with my students these really cool math tricks related to multiplying numbers and with square units and the kids were dumbfounded," Vega said. "They thought it was so cool. And the whole time, I'm beaming, because I know that whatever he does with kids, they just stop and listen and learn. That's how it was for me in fifth grade."

Vega said while the education profession has changed significantly in recent decades, O'Reilly's visit revealed the timeless qualities of teaching.

"The No. 1 goal has not changed," she said. "The No. 1 goal is still educating kids and making them feel happy about learning. And when they're happy about learning, they're going to do well. That's the inspiration that I got from him that's carried through how I look at my job."

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Longtime Waukesha educator Dwayne O'Reilly visited Horizon Elementary School sixth-grade teacher Karen Vega's class recently to lead a lesson.

Submitted photo