

Teaching Leadership

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George Washington, Alexander the Great and Joan of Arc all had one thing in common — the ability to lead. Some of what these famous individuals learned through trial and error, Shawnee High School teacher Gaye Shepherd is teaching her students in the classroom.

Shepherd, who has been teaching for seven years, runs the Leadership II class at SHS. Designed for juniors and seniors, the class has been offered for four years and runs two semesters. Each class has included about 22 students. She said Leadership I is offered to freshman and sophomores.

Leadership I is a prerequisite for enrolling in Leadership II, but because the courses have only been around for four years, the students taking it this year are the first to have taken the first course as lower classmen.

Shepherd said SHS principal Lee Hamilton first noticed the need for the course. After doing some research, Teen Leadership by M.B. Flippen was found to be a highly endorsed program. Shepherd and fellow teacher Mike Sperry were approached about teaching the class. After agreeing, they attended a required four-day training session.

"Gateway was instrumental in attaining funding for this training and the materials," Shepherd said.

The first few weeks of the class are spent discussing qualities that make people good leaders. Community needs and ideas for involvement also are considered.

"Students learn that they can make a difference in the community they live in. If they see something they think needs to change or someone who needs help, they will have the skills to take on that project — not wait for someone else to take care of the problem," Shepherd said.

Some class projects have included delivering meals for Project Heart, mentoring middle school students, visiting nursing home residents, assisting in PE classes for special education students, Salvation Army's Angel Tree and bell ringing programs, working with students at Jefferson Elementary, collecting funds for disaster relief, job shadowing and Operation Christmas.

"I like delivering meals for Project Heart because it helped me to get to know the elderly in the community," student Alicia Whittington said.

"Playing with the special education students in PE is the best thing ever," student Gunner Wright added. Shepherd said students are graded on participation in required projects and on a few journal entries about their experiences. Students also are required to complete a minimum of five hours of community service outside the assigned projects.

Shepherd said she believes students are not the only ones who benefit from her course.

"The community benefits by having 20 extra volunteers to help with a project. I believe it also allows the adults to see that teenagers have a lot to offer and are willing to help wherever they see a need," she said.

To honor the senior citizens in the community with an evening of dancing, food and fun, a Senior Citizens Prom was held April 21 at the South Community Center. Students decorated for the event, prepared the food and played music from the 1940s and 1950s.

"Unfortunately, only about 12 people showed up," she said. "We're trying to figure out a way to have better attendance next year."

Special Education Fun Day was held May 1 and included many of the activities that are part of the Special Olympics. Students participated in bocce ball, croquet, softball and football throw, cheerleading, bean bag toss, hula hoops, face painting, horseshoes and races, then were fed a hot dog lunch.

"Nearly 100 students from the elementary schools, middle school and high school in the Shawnee district attended this year," Shepherd said.

A program to encourage students against drinking and driving before prom was held May 8 and featured Curt Kindschuh, founder of Drunk Busters, speaking to all juniors and seniors.

During the following three days, students drove golf carts, participated in field sobriety tests and other activities while wearing goggles that simulated the effects of blood alcohol levels. The majority of this program was funded by a grant from the Shawnee Educational Foundation.

Funding for many Leadership II projects comes from community donations or from the students themselves. Money raised from the sale of "Wolfpack Pride" bracelets helped the class make a donation to purchase school supplies for Iraqi children.

Shepherd said the class can be as boring or as exciting as the students make it, as they choose many of the projects themselves and are responsible for planning and implementing them.

Shepherd said she wants members of the community to know how wonderful teenagers are. "They have so much enthusiasm and compassion for something they believe in," she said. "They are full of ideas and all they need is some guidance to know where to focus their energy."

As student Kelly Litherland said about taking the course: "I feel like I am not only better prepared for college, I am better prepared for life."

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