



Shirley St. Amand teaches her first-grade class at Tiogue Elementary School in Coventry.

Retiring teacher leaves legacy

HANNAH PIECUCH

hpiecuch@ricentral.com

COVENTRY—This spring Coventry's number one teacher will finish her last school year in the district. Shirley St. Amand, who has taught in Coventry for 38 years, will retire when school lets out this year, but she leaves a legacy behind, according to her superintendent, co-workers and a multitude of former students.

St. Amand is exactly everything that you would want in a teacher, Superintendent Kenneth DiPietro said exuberantly. "She has dedicated her life to children and in her entire profession she's never moved on from what she's always wanted to do—which is to teach. And she is the most senior teacher in the district."

When it comes to being inter-

viewed, St. Amand is modest and a little bashful. "I don't need to be interviewed," she says. But her passion for teaching quickly outshines her hesitance about an interview.

"I just love kids and I enjoy the excitement of teaching them," she says.

Teaching first grade is exciting because it's where everything begins, she continues. "You see so much growth. When the kids come to you some of them are reading and some aren't. By the end of the year they're into chapter books! And they're moving forward in their math. This is the foundation that they build on."

Until this year, St. Amand spent her entire teaching career working out of the same classroom at Oak Haven Elementary School. There she spent thirty-two years teaching

in the first grade and five teaching the second grade, when Oak Haven started looping classes.

Moving to Tiogue Elementary wasn't exactly what she expected for her last year of teaching, St. Amand admits. But she took the change in stride, and she finds herself among many old friends.

Tiogue Principal Denise Richtarik started her own career as a resource teacher at Oak Haven when St. Amand was just starting out, Richtarik said. And down the hall from St. Amand's classroom at Tiogue, one of the students from her very first first-grade class, Jeanna Sinotte, teaches fifth grade.

Having St. Amand come to Tiogue for her last year has been a pleasure, Richtarik said.

"She's lovely. She always looks for the positive in the students. She's one of those teachers that

every parent wants their kids to have."

Even with all the change that has happened in the district in the last year, St. Amand always stays positive, Richtarik said. "She's always ready to learn something new—as long as it benefits the students. She tries to make learning fun."

Even with many years of teaching under her belt, each year has had its own challenges and joys. Every year is new, St. Amand said, with new students and new faculty and always changes in the district. But it's the little things that add up and make it worthwhile, she added, "like when a parent comes up to you and thanks you or a student tells you that they love you."

This Christmas, St. Amand received a gift that took her back to the first year that she taught.

See ST. AMAND, Page A-2

St. Amand

Continued from Page A-1

A beautiful boxwood Christmas tree arrived at her home from one of the students in her first class, she said.

"The first year I was teaching I had this little boy and he brought a real Christmas tree into the class room—a small one—and we all decorated it and it was our class tree," she said. "He knew I was retiring this year and after all those years he remembered and sent me this tree."

Sinotte, who was Jenna Di Padua when she was in first grade, has loved spending the year teaching in the same school as St. Amand.

"I was in her first class and she influenced my life so much" Sinotte said. "That's why I am a teacher today."

St. Amand was still "Miss Menna," for that first year, Sinotte said. "But that April she married Dennis St. Amand and invited her whole first grade class to her wedding. Of course, we still messed up her name when she came back to teach."

What impressed Sinotte most

about St. Amand was her warmth, she said. "She just made you feel like you were the best thing in the world and you could do anything. She empowered us."

Her students have always been an encouragement to her, St. Amand says. "They keep me young and keep me on top of things."

But in particular, the year that her husband passed away, her students were there for her in a way she never expected, she said.

Dennis St. Amand was a science teacher at the middle school and high school, she said. When he died unexpectedly, "it was a good thing that I was still teaching," she recalls, "because those kids in my class really helped me get through it."

Now that she is more than halfway through her last year, St. Amand isn't quite sure what she'll do next. "I will miss this," she said. "I'm sure I'll come back and visit. But I do have four kids of my own—all grown—and I'm sure they'll keep me busy."