

Teachers of the year named

Anthony Ferro, Donald Jacques singled out for exceptional work

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COVENTRY — Becoming an award-winner forced him out of his usual comfort zone, according to one local teacher.

When his Wal-Mart Teacher of the Year award was announced in a faculty meeting this week, Anthony Ferro said, he was a little embarrassed.

A math teacher at Alan Shawn Feinstein Middle School of Coventry, Ferro said he loves his students but prefers to “fly under the radar.”

Receiving a \$1,000 Wal-Mart grant and a teacher of the year award from the Coventry store isn’t exactly staying un-

dercover, in Ferro’s estimation.

Nationwide, each Wal-Mart store has an annual teacher of the year award to give out. Nominations are dropped off at the store. Recipients win a \$100 gift card to buy classroom supplies and a \$1,000 supplies grant for the entire school.

“It’s an honor for [Ferro], I’m sure,” said Principal Dr. Michael Almeida, “and I am pleased to see him nominated for this. He is an outstanding teacher here on his team; he volunteers his time with extracurricular activities at the school.”

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COVENTRY — When the Coventry School Department chose Donald Jacques as its District Teacher of the Year, it picked someone who always rises to the occasion, no matter what, according to Dr. Donna Raptakis, principal of Washington Oak Elementary School.

She nominated Jacques, Raptakis said, because his commitment to the job, to the students and to the school has set him above the rest.

“I nominated him because he was the lead teacher on the technology grant that

we received so that we could afford to buy all of the computers and other technology that we have,” Raptakis said. “He is always there to help students or faculty for that matter, when there are questions about technology or anything else.

“Mr. Jacques is one of those teachers who is here weeks before school starts getting his classroom ready for the kids,” she said. “The kids love him — he bonds great with the special needs kids because they can relate to him, the parents love him — he gets requested all the time, and he just constantly rises to the occasion, no matter what it is.”

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He has only been a teacher for seven years, Jacques said, and he was taken aback by Raptakis' nomination.

"I figured seven years, what are the chances? There are so many other wonderful teachers here at this building, but it was a really nice gesture on Dr. Raptakis' part just to nominate me," Jacques said.

Prior to becoming a teacher seven years ago, his life was very different, Jacques said. From the time he was a young adult, he said, he worked as a general contractor building houses.

He was recently married with two small children, one 4 ½ and one 6 months old, when his life change dramatically, he said.

He was getting ready to leave for work one morning seven years ago — he was in the middle of building a house, Jacques said, when he experienced uncontrollable back pain. He attempted to walk it off, he said, but the pain became so severe that he collapsed to the ground. He told his wife he was unable to move his legs and she needed to call an ambulance.

The ambulance came and took him to the hospital where an extensive array of tests was run on his body and his brain, Jacques said. It was later determined he had experienced a stroke on his spinal cord and would never walk again, he said.

Jacques is paralyzed from the waist down and

fulfills his myriad teaching duties from a wheelchair.

"To say I was shocked was an understatement, but I knew I had a wife, I had only been married for about 4 years at that time, and two small children that I had to provide for, so I told myself I had better figure something out so that I could take care of them," Jacques said.

So he decided to go back to school and get a degree in social work, he said.

"My plan was to get my BSW in social work, so, as part of that, I had to do an internship with special services at the elementary school in Coventry and I found that I really enjoyed being there in that environment working with the kids, but I didn't have the confidence and I didn't think it would be a good fit," Jacques said. "My wife persuaded me to think differently and so I entered the master's program and now here I am seven years later teaching at Washington Oak.

Jacques said Raptakis informed him of the nomination at the end of last year. He said she invited all his students to submit letters on his behalf to be included in the nomination packet she was creating for him.

Raptakis said the initial invitation to students escalated into a stack of submission papers. Parents also submitted letters, the unified learning team wrote a letter, as did other teachers as well as all of the students, she said.

"I think the fact that Mr. Jacques' nomination packet was so special and different was also a tribute to how special he is," Raptakis said. "I am sure that the selection committee realized that when they saw how many people spoke out on his behalf."

Jacques was not the only nominee. The principals from each of the schools in Coventry were invited to submit the name of a teacher to be considered for the District Teacher of the Year honor. The winner is typically announced at a faculty-only gathering on the day before school starts after summer vacation.

With the summer months separating his nomination from the announcement of a winner, Jacques said, he prepared for the first day of school just like he would any other year, not thinking of the award presentation at all. He started to get mildly suspicious when a number of his co-workers and superiors sought to make sure he would be attending the first-day of school (for teachers only) events.

"I guess I started to think something might be up when everyone wanted to make sure that I was going to be there and then when they started to describe who they were naming as district teacher of the year, I started to realize that it was probably me," Jacques said. "That was when I started to get a little nervous like, oh no, now I am going to have to go up there and say something in front of all of these people."

He didn't have to say much, Jacques said, because the audience of his peers and co-workers embraced him warmly. He was presented with a golden apple and a certificate acknowledging his honor.

Today that apple sits on his desk and the honor, he said, he holds close to his heart.