

SUN FOCUS

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Dist. 621 student, staff being honored for service to youth

BY LOUISE EDWARDS SUN FOCUS

A very special breed of teachers, support staff and students is being honored tonight (Feb. 7) at the New Brighton Family Service Center.

Three staff members and a student from the Mounds View Schools are being recognized by the Northwest Youth and Family Services for outstanding service to youth.

They will be attending a celebration dinner alongside other school employees and students in the NYFS service area, which covers northern suburban Ramsey County.

Award winners from the Mounds View Schools include: Pat McDonald, associate principal at Irondale High School in New Brighton; Peggy Cardenas, a social worker at Sunnyside Elementary School in New Brighton; Sandy Bona-Czech, the parent volunteer coordinator at Highview Middle School in New Brighton; and Gus Connor, a student at Irondale High School.

The Outstanding Service to Youth Awards offer recognition to people who have demonstrated outstanding service and commitment to youth in the area.

McDonald, Irondale's associate principal, says that one of her highlights for the past year was participating in the school's cast of "Bye Bye Birdie," staged in early November.

She said: "I have always enjoyed working with young people and particularly enjoy this age group. I love the enthusiasm and creativity that comes from teenagers.

"I love seeing students achieve, grow and mature. Every 'thank you' I've received from students over the years has been a reward for me."

McDonald added: "I am honored and humbled to be getting this award."

Cardenas, who has worked at

Sunnyside for 17 years, says she loves the school's families and kids, who make it a wonderful place in which to work.

"I can't pick one thing that is a highlight," she said. "What makes your day is a comment that a child makes that is so insightful or funny, and that's the stuff that gets you through, and makes me excited about my job.

"I think maybe one highlight of the past year was when I was out to dinner with some people and the person who was waiting on us was a former student. She said she remembered taking part in the lunch time groups with me."

Bona-Czech, Highview's parent volunteer coordinator, says she is constantly amazed by the wonderful things she sees students doing every day.

"As a society, we hear about one major negative that might happen at a school, not the million wonderful things that happen," she said.

"When I was a student here at Highview, kids with special needs were social outcasts; now I am delighted to see how well all of our students accept others with differences.

"Last year our school started the H20 for Life project (which is now district-wide) and we were overwhelmed by the number of kids that wanted to help. Kids were constantly coming to me with new ideas on ways to help the community and school."

Connor, the district's fourth award winner, is a student at Irondale who played a large part in the staging of the school's "Bye Bye Birdie" production. He could not be reached for comment.

The Northwest Youth and Family Services is a non-profit agency helping more than 3,000 people a year, providing services in mental health counseling, performing chores for seniors, assisting families in need and youth who have been charged with misdemeanor crimes.