

From the Gatesville Messenger
Aug. 27, 2011

Maxwell chosen as top teacher in state

Sara Yows Maxwell, a teacher at the Valley Unit satellite, has been named the recipient of the “Lane Murray Excellence in Teaching” award by the Windham School District (WSD).

Maxwell will be recognized at the October meeting of the Texas Board of Criminal Justice (TBCJ), which also serves as the WSD school board.

“I teach in correctional education because I can make a difference in the future lives of my students,” Maxwell said. “The incarcerated women who come to my class really need the skills our curriculum provides to become productive members of society when they return home.”

A Gatesville High School graduate, Maxwell received her college degree from Southwest Texas State University. She worked at the University of Alabama for 25 years before returning to Gatesville.

She has taught personal and family development at the Crain Unit’s Valley satellite since 2000.

“I am amazed every day by what some of our students accomplish while they are incarcerated,” she commented, “and I’m proud to be part of that process.”

She said many of the individuals are able to achieve a GED and certificates of accomplishments they did not think were attainable.

“My goal is to help them return to their families as more confident women who can obtain gainful employment and provide a loving home for their families,” Maxwell stated.

The personal and family development class teaches many of the same skills as home economics, such as sewing and cooking.

In addition, the women learn skills such as personal finance, child care, healthy lifestyles and employment skills.

One of the certificates the women can achieve is from a ServSafe course that is helpful in gaining employment in food service.

Maxwell said the class is very rewarding and she has seen remarkable changes in some of the women who attend her classes over six hours a day for 6-9 months.

Many of her students have been impacted by the teacher.

“Ms. Maxwell has an effect on people that makes you want to be in her class,” said inmate A. Wells. “Teaching is her calling. She was meant to do this.”

“Ms. Maxwell deserved this acknowledgement because she is the true definition of a teacher,” added R. Torres. “Coming to her class every day shows me that there are people who want to see us succeed upon our release. Ms. Maxwell takes us out of the prison mentality and gives us hands-on experiences of everyday life.”

One teacher from each campus in the Windham School District was initially nominated for the 2010-11 award. From the nominations, the regional office selects four teachers to continue in the process.

Each teacher is interviewed and observed in a classroom setting. One teacher is then selected to represent each region of the state.

On the state level, each finalist is again interviewed and observed in a classroom.

“They represent what is best in correctional education,” WSD Superintendent Debbie Roberts said about the four finalists. “These top four teachers exemplify the high degree of dedication and expertise required to change offenders’ lives within the state prison system. We are proud to have them represent us.”

TBCJ Chairman Oliver Bells agreed with Roberts.

“It is a privilege to recognize the WSD Excellence in Teaching winner and finalist as consummate educators,” he said. “Our board also serves as the board of trustees for WSD, so we are very impressed with the accomplishments of these educators.”

Other finalists were literacy and changes instruction teacher Cathy Farris of the Estelle Unit (Huntsville); literacy instructor Pam Gibson of the Ware Unit (Colorado City); and Dolores Able, who teaches English as a second language at the C.T. Terrell Unit (Rosharon).

The “Lane Murray Excellence in Teaching Award” is named for Dr. Lane Murray, the first superintendent of the Windham School District, which was formed in 1969.

Gatesville’s Lane Murray Unit is also named in her honor.

A special thanks to Editor Larry Kennedy for permission to reprint this article.