

INSPIRA Distinguished Service Awards 2015 – Award of Merit in Faculty/Certified Staff category

Nick Hildreth

Nick Hildreth grew up with an older brother who has special needs, so it's not surprising he found his way inside a special education classroom as a Developmental Learning Program teacher.

But to Hildreth, who teaches at Willowbrook High School (part of DuPage High School District 88), special education is no different than any other classroom.

"He is such a talented educator," said Sara Courington, Willowbrook Special Education Department Chair. "He has an amazing ability to balance accommodating the needs of the students while still setting high standards for each one of them."

Courington said Hildreth knows what it takes to help the students succeed, and he's constantly coming up with innovative ways to ensure they achieve their goals. One example of Hildreth's creativity is Willowbrook's Awesome Coffee Shop. Hildreth knew his students needed to develop life and vocational skills to transition into the workplace after high school, so he recommended starting the Awesome Coffee Shop, which was implemented in 2012-13. Through that initiative, the aroma of hot coffee fills the halls of the school each morning as the students in the Developmental Learning Program make, sell and deliver coffee, hot chocolate and lemonade. Every day, the students can be seen smiling as they bring a warm cup to students and staff, while learning valuable skills that will enable them to seek employment in the future.

"Hildreth has really found ways to break these students out of their shell and allow them to interact with their peers, as well as staff members," Courington said. "By building those relationships, his kids have truly flourished."

Hildreth, who also is the Head Football Coach at Willowbrook, creates those bonds through encouraging his football players and other students to visit the Developmental Learning Program during their free time, as well as having the Developmental Learning Program students assist with the football team. He also inspires students in the Developmental Learning Program to be leaders by showing them how they can be mentors through a partnership with the School Association for Special Education in DuPage County (SASED). The students regularly visit the SASED classroom at Willowbrook, which was established for students with multiple special needs.

But Hildreth's work and dedication to helping his students go beyond the classrooms and walls at Willowbrook. He wanted to pursue vocational opportunities in the community for his students, and he was determined to make those connections. Because of his efforts, students in the Developmental Learning Program now help prepare and serve lunch for senior citizens twice a week at York Township Senior Center in Lombard.

Willowbrook senior Lorenzo Delgado, a student in the Developmental Learning Program, described Hildreth as "a nice person and a great teacher."

"We work at different places in the community, and (Hildreth) teaches us skills to help us get a job," said Delgado, who works at a local restaurant called Anyway's.

Delgado said his favorite activities with Hildreth are selling hot chocolate and watching movies.

Willowbrook Principal Dan Krause said he couldn't be more proud of Hildreth's success.

“Hildreth embodies what it means to be a Willowbrook Warrior,” Krause said. “Our mission is to work for the continuous improvement of student achievement, and it is with staff members like Hildreth that we will accomplish that mission. He is passionate about student learning and building futures for our students, and that’s what we’re all about at Willowbrook.”

Courington agreed.

“Hildreth is such a humble person, who quietly makes a positive difference in the lives of students,” she said. “I can’t think of anyone more deserving of this award.”