



2009 NATIONAL TEACHER OF THE YEAR FINALIST

MAKING A DIFFERENCE - SHAPING THE FUTURE



CYNTHIA COLE RIGSBEE

2009 North Carolina Teacher of the Year

Gravelly Hill Middle School
Efland, NC

School profile: Rural
Students in district: 6,947
Students in building: 470

Teaching area: Reading
Teaching level: 6 – 8

Years in teaching: 21
Years in present position: 3

II. Educational History and Professional Development Activities

Education

M.Ed. K-12 Literacy
B.A./English Education
Undergraduate Studies/English

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill - 2003
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill - 1979
North Carolina State University - 1977

Teaching Experience

2006 – Present

6 & 7th Grade

Orange County Schools
Reading Resource Teacher

1990 – 2000, 2003 – 2006

7 & 8th Grade

Durham Public Schools
Language Arts
Teacher Recruiter – NC Department of Public Instruction
New Teacher Induction Coordinator

2002 – 2003

Wake County Public Schools
Teacher Trainer/National Board Certification Support

1987 – 1990

8th Grade
6 – 8th Grade

Vance County Schools
Language Arts
Basic Education Program Dance/Drama Teacher

1979 – 1980

10 – 12th Grade

Guilford County Schools
English & Drama

Professional Associations

- National Education Association
- North Carolina Association of Educators
- Orange County Association of Educators
- Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
- North Carolina Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
- International Reading Association
- North Carolina Reading Association
- Teacher Leaders Network/Center for Teaching Quality
- Public School Forum of North Carolina - Board Member
- North Carolina Education Policy Fellowship Program - Fellow

Leadership Activities

- Member - Orange County Schools LEA Improvement Team/Closing the Achievement Gap Committee – 2008
- Member - Superintendent's Teacher Advisory Committee – 2006 - 2008
- Member - Gravelly Hill Middle School Leadership Team/School Improvement Team
- PLC Fellow - ASSET Partnership - Center for Teaching Quality/Orange/Wake Schools
- Presenter - Literacy Workshops for Elective Teachers and New Teachers – August 2006 - Present
- Instructional Team Member/High Yields Strategies Presentations to GHMS Staff
- AVID Site Team Member/AVID Overview Presentation to GHMS Staff – 2006- 2007
- Professional Learning Community Presentation - Orange County Middle Schools – 2007
- Orange County Schools Beginning Teacher Presentations - October 2006 – Present
- GHMS/Orange County Schools New Teacher Orientation - August 2006 – Present
- Orange County Schools National Board Certification Candidate Support Meeting – 2006 - Present
- Instructor - Durham Technical Community College -"Balanced Literacy" – 2003-2006

Conference Presenter:

- North Carolina Teaching Fellows Program Seminar Speaker – 2008
- North Carolina Association of Teacher Educators Forum Luncheon Speaker – 2008
- Alamance, Chatham and Catawba Counties - New Teacher Keynote Speaker – 2008
- NC Model Teacher Education Consortium/lateral Entry Conference – Keynote Speaker – September 2008/January 2006
- Orange County Schools Convocation Speaker – August 2007
- National Turning Points Conference "Whole School Literacy" – February 2004

Awards and Other Recognition of Teaching:

- Governor's Appointee to the North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards Commission – 2008
- University of North Carolina School of Education Excellence in Teaching Award – 2008
- North Carolina Teacher of the Year/Piedmont/Triad Central Teacher of the Year – 2008 - 2009
- Recipient - Educational Foundation Grant – 2007 - 2008
- Orange County Teacher of the Year/Gravelly Hill Middle School Teacher of the Year – 2007 - 2008
- Terry Sanford Award for Creativity and Innovation in Teaching/Finalist – 2005
- National Board Certified Teacher – 2004

III. Professional Biography

Maggie Elizabeth Kennedy rode in a mule drawn wagon at the end of the nineteenth century to travel from the Sandhills of North Carolina to a school for teachers in Columbia, South Carolina. Years later, while in her early nineties, she often told me the story of "The Little Match Girl" as I lay beside her, scared breathless for the little girl who would not survive the cold. Still, I listened, spellbound, to the sound of storytelling by a little lady from the country who had taught so many in her long life. It would have been altogether fitting for me to want to follow in the footsteps of my great grandmother and become a teacher. However, I had no desire to be an educator.

I wanted to be a Dallas Cowboy cheerleader.

Nonetheless, other forces prevailed in my life that led me to this honorable profession. First, didn't all teachers love school as a child? School was my link to a world with a view different from the modest surroundings I saw outside my bedroom window. A book could take me anywhere. (I really believed I was Harriet the Spy!) As I progressed through middle and high school, my cheerleader dream persevered, but it was then that I began to notice I had a love for something else—my English classes. I remember thinking, *How exciting! A forty page term paper on Robert Frost!* while all of my classmates were grumbling and whining. I chose English as my college major without a clue as to what I would do with it. At that time, my university offered only two options for an English major: become an editor or become a teacher. All of a sudden it was clear—I would be a teacher. And although I wasn't sure I had the courage for a job that could impact so many, as I think back over twenty-one years and almost 2,000 children, I realize I made the right decision. And Great Granny Maggie would be proud...

My greatest contributions to the field of education can be found in the affirmations given by those 2,000 students. I have had the opportunity, over the course of my career, to earn an award here and there. But nothing has ever matched the feeling that I experience when I know I have the opportunity to change the direction of a life.

Although it sounds cliché, isn't it the real reason we hit that tile floor running every morning and push ourselves to stay two decibels higher on the energy scale than our students? The testimonies of my students are unforgettable—Jimmy, for example, who I held and rocked on the floor of a rubber room in a nearby medical center after his suicide threat, and Maria who couldn't read an entire sentence in English last year but who is thriving now. Because of students like those, I'll get up in the morning and try to do it better.

Another important contribution that I am extremely proud of is the impact I have had on beginning teachers. I have had the opportunity to mentor new teachers at the building level, but I've also worked with many educators across the state. I have served as a teacher recruiter, working with potential teachers, and I have been involved with countless new teacher trainings. This year, as I presented at five separate beginning teacher orientations, I thought about the responsibility of impacting professional lives. I have the opportunity every year to be the first face they see, the first voice they hear; I could have the chance to

influence the path of their first school year. I feel that it is my job to be a cheerleader (finally... the job I always wanted!) for our profession, a messenger, and an advocate. I am honored to be a "voice of teaching" for novice teachers.

As far as accomplishments, I have had the occasion to present at several state and national conferences; these endeavors always bring me joy. I'm proud to be a National Board Certified Teacher in the area of English/Language Arts, and I'm honored that I was able to return to school and receive my master's degree at forty-six years old, twenty four years after I earned my bachelor's. Also, in the past year I have published several articles, including tips for new teachers, on Teacher Magazine online, and have begun the process of writing a book on the search for our teaching identities. But my most important accomplishments lie in the words of my students: for example, I'll never forget Joseph, who looked at me on the last day of school not too long ago:

"You," he said. "You gave me the courage to read."

No, Joseph, it was you. You gave me the courage to teach.

IV. Community Involvement

It began as a simple question to seventh graders about the setting of a book:

"And what was the name of the state?" I asked. Blank faces stared back at me.

"It starts with an 'A,'" I prompted.

"Australia!" one student offered. "Africa!" another suggested.

It was at that moment, in that classroom, that I knew I wanted to open a community literacy center in the small town surrounding my school. I wanted the opportunity to give students, and their families, basic skills that could be built upon during the school day. I began looking around our small community for a building to house our center. When I didn't have any luck, my principal offered me the use of our school's library.

At that point, I knew that I only needed to secure materials and manpower and refreshments (well, there are priorities.) Currently, we are working with Hispanic families on language and reading skills (and they are helping us with our Spanish!) Our Sunday afternoon pizza luncheons afford us the opportunity to share our knowledge with others in a non-threatening atmosphere.

Our next steps include offering reading instruction to adults in our community while giving their children homework help (and building prior knowledge in content areas like geography.) The Gravelly Hill Community Literacy Center is literally a dream come true. My dream is growing continually, and my brain works faster than my resources, but I am patient. One day we will be instilling prior knowledge community-wide and our school will reap the benefits as we watch our students come to class better prepared. I have had plenty of practice for this type of service as a result of working in a school—classrooms of students are always eager to give back to their communities: they have collected "Pennies for Patients" in memory of my father; they were "Change Bandits" for the Duke Children's Hospital; they made and sold ribbons for the tsunami victims of 2004, and they "adopted" Hurricane Katrina victims. Working in public schools offers us so many opportunities to give back to the community. It's a challenge we must accept on behalf of, and in honor of, our students who live there.

V. Philosophy of Teaching

When I began middle school in the South in 1969, all lanky legs and frizzy hair, segregation was just coming to an end in my school district. I watched in horror as adults lined the streets of the school bus route and threw rocks at our bus in protest. We often had a police escort to and from school. One day I watched a White student stand up in front of the bus, sing "Dixie," and then jump out, followed by ten Black students in chase. I experienced my first day in a school building with Black children that year; three of them looked at me in the girls' bathroom and asked, "How does it feel to be White?" All of these experiences have impacted me as a teacher but not because I grew up in White suburbia. Even though they had not been my schoolmates up until this point, my neighbors (and friends) were Black. So my struggle and the struggle of others, during this historical time taught me about social injustice. I have always been keenly aware that education is the difference between living in government housing and having better opportunities. Simply put, that's why I teach. I am here to offer my students a chance.

Recently I wrote a poem that I shared with my classes. It describes a day I spent in my old neighborhood. I stressed one excerpt from the poem:

Old tires	and I know
serve as...	I now live
flower gardens,	only two college degrees
sandboxes,	from here.
driveway boundaries...	

I share my experiences with my students so that they can truly understand the cliché they hear daily regarding the importance of their educations. I tell them how lucky they are to be able to sit side by side—Black, White, Hispanic, Asian—and about how I was bussed from my neighborhood to a White elementary school, while my Black neighbors got on their busses and rode in another direction. My students can't perceive of a time like this, but these stories enable me to develop a relationship with them that can potentially influence their decision-making. I believe that it is that relationship that makes me a successful teacher (along with the cheerleader kicks I do when my students answer correctly...) I recently had an amazing experience—a reunion with my first grade teacher on Good Morning America! My story is common: the unconditional regard I received from a teacher forged who I am as an educator and as a person. Mrs. Barbara Warnecke was only twenty-three years old when she overlooked my appearance and social status, showered me with attention and affirmation, and taught me how to read. As a result, forty five years later, I am a reading teacher who is working diligently to emulate her. On September 5, 2008, as my first grade teacher and I embraced on national television, my mind focused on the impact we have as educators. I must be aware of that impact with every lesson I plan and with every comment I make to a child. I have the opportunity, in fact the responsibility, to be that teacher who makes a difference. By treating each student with sincere compassion and concern, while ensuring that they are receiving exemplary instruction, I am able to offer each of them that chance as individuals while at the same time

impacting the social inequities in our communities. And as important as these philosophies are to me, I have certainly gathered other, shall we say, sub-philosophies along the way that impact my personal teaching style. So, in addition to believing that my influence as a teacher can mean offering students more chances and believing that the relationship is the most important component of a classroom, I also believe strongly that:

- my students must be aware that I love what I'm doing, and I must portray that affection for my job (and for my students) every minute of every day;
- we must experience such joy in my classroom that students don't realize that sometimes the work is hard (Dr. Randy Pausch called it "head faking" in his Last Lecture);
- the students' well being and achievement come first and foremost, regardless of the time and energy I must expend; and
- it is necessary to partake of food in the classroom as often as is reasonable, whether we are making pancakes, enjoying pizza delivery, or eating chicken biscuits picked up at the drive-through on the way to school.

These are the philosophies (and sub-philosophies) of education that have undergirded my career. I am sure that I will discover others along the way that are just as meaningful. But for now it is my goal to deliver captivating instruction while having fun and eating biscuits. And the reward? Take a seventh grader's goofy grin, add it to ten points higher on a quiz than last week, and surround it with a vision of a middle school child who will one day have a chance as an adult. That's all I need to feel rewarded.

VI. Education Issues and Trends

There are so many issues affecting public education that I did not have to face when I began teaching in 1979. For example, school violence was unheard of at that time, aside from a sporadic schoolyard fight. However, my colleagues and I have experienced the horror of having to set instruction aside and implement a "lockdown" while shots were being fired into an adjacent high school's cafeteria. Another issue that plagues us is the lack of respect for teaching as a profession. Inadequate compensation, high turnover rate, and the decline of our nation's college students choosing education as a major are both reasons for and a result of that lack of respect. And although these concerns are extremely important to everyone who loves schools, the issue that impacts educators on a daily basis is high stakes testing. It begins with a voice on the intercom on the first day of school. "Remember, there are 170 days until the End-of-Grade test!" and it continues until the test scores are reported in June.

Unfortunately, I do remember a time when there was no real accountability; we were able to teach what we liked without worry that our students were being shortchanged. To say that there was a need for curriculum reform is an understatement. I remember educators referring to our middle school as "Blockbuster Middle School" because of the movies that were shown daily and the students who sat mute and zombie-like.

As a result of the focus on assessment, there have been many positive changes in our schools. Teachers must follow their curriculum as mandated by the state, and collaboration occurs in Professional Learning Communities in an effort to plan engaging activities and to develop pacing guides and other resources. Educators are aware that time is precious so activities that are out of alignment with "getting results" are tossed out. Although teaching is now more focused than in years past, and students are aware of the importance of their achievement, there are also negative effects of standardized testing

There is an immense amount of pressure placed on teachers by administrators who have pressure placed on them by their superiors. Teachers feel that their instruction is under more scrutiny than ever before. Administrators are becoming more visible in the classrooms looking for objectives written on the board and monitoring student engagement. As a result, there is a great deal of tension in many school buildings. I have watched eighth graders test with tears streaming down their faces, knowing that one low score would mean they would be unable to move on to high school. I have heard of a teacher missing her trips to Tangentville." In the past, rich discussions sprang from ideas that today would be considered "off the subject." Most importantly, there is the concern that the tests themselves are not valid. How can we ascertain that one test, given on one day, can determine if a student is proficient in a subject? Teachers feel that they have had to give up instruction for test preparation and that data has replaced good old professional judgment. In addition, creativity and risk-taking may be ideas of the past if we don't reform our accountability programs.

How can we work in an atmosphere of accountability without stressing our educators and our students? I believe we should develop a more authentic testing system, which includes multiple measures

of assessment: portfolios of student work, records of teacher observations, and documentation of student interviews and reflection. Formative assessments are also necessary so that educators have more than one number to consider in terms of student proficiency. In addition, a growth model should be included in the accountability provisions so that we can adequately measure what our students are achieving. It appears that we are taking Stephen Covey's "begin with the end in mind" a little too literally. Our focus is on the end result—the test score—and we're losing the opportunity for rich teaching along the way. It reminds me of continually thinking about the end of our lives and missing out on living!

As Americans we have no choice but to insist that schools prepare our students for the global economy of the 21st century. Our high school graduates are no longer only competing with hometown folk for jobs; they are competing against anyone in the world with access to the internet. We must look at a different type of education—our students need alternatives to sitting in brick buildings from eight until four every day. Educators should consider webinars and podcasts as an integral part of classroom instruction. And let's delineate the education process. High school students now have the opportunity to gain early college credit through virtual classes. We must shift our focus from the end and provide more opportunities for making instruction rigorous, relevant, and flexible along the way. We must work to find an accountability model that nurtures teacher creativity—and lessens the stress that educators and students experience while at the same time reshaping our schools to meet the vision of the 21st century.

VII. The Teaching Profession

I believe it lies within each individual educator to improve the teaching profession. It begins in the school buildings as we collaborate as professionals, sharing and planning in the best interest of the students we teach. In addition, since we find ourselves between those classroom walls for the majority of our day, we have to be creative when it comes to sharing. I like for my "walls to talk" about the important work I do. When I display student work, I include the learning goals, requirements of the assignment, and the scoring rubric in the presentation. Many times teachers come to me to ask to "borrow" an assignment they've seen outside my door or an example of a rubric. My hope is that a lesson I have worked hard to perfect may mean that one of my colleagues has a new activity that will be meaningful for students. Using that same idea, I often have my students "invite" their teachers to participate in our class. Last year's "Halloween Fright Fair" was a venue to display our "scary" projects, but teachers also were able to listen to our original ghost stories while munching carrot cake under orange lights and spider webs. As we share the best that we, and our students, do in a school, we strengthen instruction across the building.

I am so passionate about strengthening our profession that there are times I wake in the night with an idea, and go into manic mode trying to implement it. Two years ago, I was tossing and turning over how to help teachers understand the research behind using classroom Read-Alouds. The next day I asked my principal if I could begin sending out a "Literacy Tip of the Week." This mass email includes ideas for reading across the curriculum, links to helpful websites, and other literacy resources. That weekly email is frequently forwarded by my colleagues to Central Office staff and teachers in other areas of the state. A middle-of-the-night epiphany has become another way for me to make our profession stronger.

I am aware that we have to work on a more global effort as well. We must recruit the best and brightest to teaching and ensure that support systems are in place that will impact teacher retention. As we consider recruitment, we must realize that our future colleagues are sitting in our own classrooms today; future educators are watching us closely; possibly unaware that one day they may be trying to emulate us. It isn't too early to begin recruiting—we need to recognize the leaders in our classrooms, those who feel drawn to helping others. A few words of encouragement—"you'd make a great teacher someday"—may make all the difference. Likewise, we must support our Future Teachers of America clubs and Teacher Cadet programs as we work toward a "grow our own" model of recruitment in our communities.

In addition, I am always first in line when my principal asks for volunteers for our district's teacher job fair. I love the energy there, and as I ask questions, I can tell in thirty seconds if a candidate has the passion we need in our schools. Once I've found the "perfect fit," I jump into "Public Relations Mode," selling our schools and our profession to the candidate, and then following up with calls and emails, and becoming a supportive colleague as this teacher makes the transition to a school. Research tells us that teachers who are supported stay. And in this 21st Century environment, that support can reach colleagues all over the world; my "Tips for New Teachers" article published on Teacher Magazine online has been copied by teacher educators and shared with education majors. My "Dream Teacher" blog has provided

advice to readers all over the country. And my district has a cadre of National Board Certified teachers who are providing online mentoring for beginning teachers. Sharing expertise virtually is a relatively new way to strengthen our profession, but it is certainly in line with thinking and working effectively as educators. But how can we measure that effectiveness?

As we consider teacher evaluation, we must adopt a model of professional growth, not a "gotcha" instrument. When discussions evolve from administrative observations, when peer observations enable us to share best practices with our colleagues, and when evaluation documents are living, breathing documents and not pieces of paper that gather dust in a file cabinet, our accountability system works. We need to resist the urge to link teacher accountability to student test scores and instead continue to think of evaluation as a tool that enables teachers to grow as educators. Meanwhile we must have support systems in place for teachers in every stage of their careers; only then will our profession strengthen and prosper.

VIII. National Teacher of the Year

What an honor to be a spokesperson for the teaching profession! Once a teacher is named Teacher of the Year, he/she has a thunderous "voice" that can no longer speak only for the individual; it is representative of thousands of hard working educators. My message as National Teacher of the Year is simple: Teachers Are Professionals! I have been frustrated throughout my career to hear comments from the public that negate the challenging work that educators do. "Those who can—do; those who can't—teach" is one. And questions like, "Are you enjoying your summer off?" and "Don't you leave at 2:30 every day?" are examples of the misconceptions of the public. Our citizens need to be aware of the tremendous effort and purposeful thought that go into our jobs daily. And teachers need to better understand how to market themselves and their schools. Sure, attire is important for the "look" of a professional. But what we say when we are in the grocery store and around the neighborhood pool has a great deal of impact on how the public perceives us. The negativity must stop at the schoolhouse door and be remedied in the important collaboration that occurs in Professional Learning Communities. As I determine "professionalism," I think of major companies and how they function. I attend my professional meetings without grumbling, I continue to read professional journals and websites to stay on top of the latest news in my profession, and I speak positively about my experiences as a professional educator. In addition, I seize opportunities to be a voice and advocate for the teachers I represent. (And, actually, as I relate teaching to the business world, I'd like to advocate for the day that we have workout areas in our schools and dry cleaning service available like our business neighbors. Can you imagine how many teachers we could retain if we offered on-site Day Cares?)

As we shift the thinking of others about what we do, eventually we'll influence the thinking of legislators and others who impact education policy. The voice of an inspiring Teacher of the Year will move us closer to a widespread understanding of teaching as a profession. And although it's entirely a coincidence that the acronym for my message—Teachers Are Professionals—is TAP, I do have a pair of tap shoes. I'm ready to take my dance across the country and "shuffle, ball, CHANGE" some attitudes!

(LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION #1)

To the Honorable Members of the Selection Committee of the National Teacher of the Year,

Knowing Cindi Rigsbee is a joy. She is truly a delightful human being, one who has that rare ability to affect the character of the day. Her infectious, slightly mischievous and knowing smile connects in a way that words cannot convey. That is not to say she isn't a master crafter of words. She is a great teller of the stories of her own life... stories packed with humor, delight and wonderful messages about life.

I haven't been in her classroom with students, but I have witnessed the most recalcitrant, jaded, hard-hearted students give her the warmest hugs. I believe that she inspires something in the soul of her students which draws them out to connect with their own stories of life. I think of no more compelling reason to write. Cindi demonstrates those life connections so vibrantly that it opens the door to writing so wide that others are swept in.

Over the past three years, our staff has had the pleasure of taking literacy training with her. As a direct result of our first workshop with Cindi, our physical education teacher was inspired to write down some of his own stories about his love of sports. He connected so deeply to that process that he is writing poetry this year.

Even though she is a reading specialist whose professional task is to remediate high needs students, her work cuts across many academic disciplines. In preparation for this letter, I surveyed the teachers at our school. What struck me is the wide range of responses I received, including ones from the academically and intellectually gifted teacher, the chorus teacher and a math teacher, among others.

"Cindi's infectious good nature spilled out into the hall. She made time for everyone with a smile, and you always felt better after talking to her. After she was named State Teacher of the Year, I told her whenever I was unsure of how to respond to a student I would think to myself 'What would Cindi do?'" - Ina Fauser, Math Teacher

"During the past year I have observed Cindi teaching students of all ages and learning levels. Whether it has been a reading class, a workshop, a new teacher training program or working with me on my National Boards, Cindi is always the same passionate teacher with a special place in her heart for anyone with a need. " - DJ Bray, Chorus Teacher

"Cindi was my mentor during my first year of teaching, but she taught me much more about education than I had expected to learn. She was able to help me see through to the heart of each issue, to meet students where they were, and to provide each student with appropriate challenges every day. Not only was she a role model in the classroom, but she was also a role model in life - qualities that will not soon be lost nor forgotten - Amy Harrison, AIG Teacher (Academically and Intellectually Gifted)

Is Cindi ready to meet the challenge of being a national spokesperson for the teaching profession? Yes, Cindi is naturally photogenic and poised in front of an audience. But don't take my word for it. See for yourself: <http://abcnews.go.com/Video/playerIndex?id=5734025>

If you have any more questions, please feel free to ask. I stand ready to support her candidacy in any other way that you may ask

Sincerely,

Gregory Louie
Biotechnology Teacher
Gravelly Hill Middle School
Efland, North Carolina

(LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION #2)

To Whom It May Concern:

The purpose of this letter is to express my unconditional and enthusiastic support for Mrs. Cindi Rigsbee as a candidate for National Teacher of the Year. Cindi's approach to education can best be described as passionate, results-oriented, innovative, student-centered, as well as colleague-centered. As a result, her positive impact spreads well beyond her classroom walls and into many other phases of school life here at Gravelly Hill Middle School (GHMS). I am confident that others in the United States could benefit tremendously from her experience and influence as well.

As alluded to above, Cindi carries out a number of important leadership roles here at Gravelly Hill Middle School. For instance, she actively leads as a member of our Leadership Team, a member of our Instructional Team, a consultant for our Student Support Team, a mentor for multiple novice teachers, and a literacy strategy trainer for our entire elective department. On a district level, Cindi contributes to the Beginning Teachers Program and provides support to those teachers seeking National Board Certification. Beyond these specific roles, Cindi's genuinely caring personality, exceptional people skills, and affinity for staying abreast of the latest trends in effective instructional techniques have earned her great credibility with our entire staff and thus caused her to have a powerful influence on the emerging culture of GHMS, a school in its second year of existence. Her weekly "Literacy Tip of the Week" and frequent praise of colleagues' outstanding instructional performance(s) have helped keep our hallways and meeting rooms "abuzz" with talk of effective instruction and student achievement. Her teaching expertise is sought after on a daily basis. Not surprisingly, Cindi's car is always one of the last few remaining on the school parking lot in the evening.

Despite all this service to her professional colleagues, Cindi's primary focus has always been on serving kids. She wears a perpetual smile in her classroom and can always be seen giving high-fives and hugs. High levels of student engagement and the successful implementation of research-proven literacy strategies are also a given in Room 521. As evidenced by substantial gains in student confidence levels as well as reading and writing test scores, Cindi is a master of turning positive relationships with students and their families in to positive results.

In summary, Mrs. Cindi Rigsbee's rare blend of instructional expertise, strong work ethic, and community outreach skills make her the ideal candidate for National Teacher of the Year.

Sincerely,

Jason Johnson
Principal
Gravelly Hill Middle School
Efland, North Carolina

(LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION #3)

To Whom It May Concern:

It gives me an honor and a privilege to recommend Ms. Cindi Rigsbee as National Teacher of the Year. Ms. Rigsbee has been an inspiration to every child she has come in contact with. She instills hope and a sense of self worth to all the children in her classroom.

I remember when I first met Ms. Rigsbee. It was the summer before my sons started 6th grade. I was nervous because I truly believed that after elementary school, classroom teachers would not continue to meet the individual needs of my two children. I thought that they would be just another face in the class and name on the roster. This thought was immediately dismissed from my mind after I met Ms. Rigsbee. I went over to C. W. Stanford where Gravelly Hill students were being housed until October, when they would move into their newly built school. I wanted to talk to one of the reading teachers. There I met my sons' guardian angel. She was extremely friendly and approachable. When I began talking to her about my son and his struggles she listened intently. When I finished I was almost in tears because I felt so helpless. She smiled and told me that she had looked through my son's records and was familiar with his Individualized Education Plan. A sense of calmness came over me at that very minute. She not only was familiar with my son's IEP, but she knew that my other son did not have one. She told me all about the plan for both of my sons. She was very knowledgeable about my sons' needs.

As the school year began Ms. Rigsbee delivered exactly what she had promised. That first school year she only worked with one of my children, but she was an inspiration to both of them. My other son who was not in her class came home to share a funny story about her each week. These stories involved positive interactions the two of them had in the hallways or in the cafeteria during lunch. Ms. Rigsbee motivated both of my children to take an interest in reading. I vividly remember talking with my children's teachers during parent teacher conferences, and there was not one conference that Ms. Rigsbee's name was not mentioned. The teachers would explain how Ms. Rigsbee's class and the skills she was teaching had flowed over to their classroom. It had made my child a well rounded student.

That next year, both of my sons were fortunate enough to have Ms. Rigsbee. I looked forward to picking them up each afternoon and hearing about the life stories Ms. Rigsbee shared or the novels they read. She chose books from Maniac McGee to Tuck Everlasting and had a way to make the stories personal for each child. She used books to teach life lessons to the children. My children could analyze the books and not only apply what they learned to the decisions they would make in life but used these deciphering techniques in other classes.

Ms Rigsbee was the glue for most of these children. She was the missing piece to their puzzle. She made the difference in these kids coming to school and being eager to learn or staying home. Ms. Rigsbee is the type of teacher that could relate to children from every ethnic background and any social status. In her eyes they were all human beings that were capable of learning.

During the course of the year I have visited her classroom several times. The kids are always actively engaged in what they are doing. This is simply because Ms. Rigsbee makes learning fun.

Ms. Rigsbee is very professional. I have never heard her complain, nor have I heard her put down a co-worker, child, or the administration. I do not know how she balances her day but she does it with a smile. I am a firm believer that a child imitates the behaviors they see. Ms. Rigsbee demands and receives excellence from all her kids. Ms. Rigsbee taught my child that nothing is impossible and that all dreams are attainable. In the past my children have been asked "What do you want to be when you grow up?" The response has been "a football or baseball player." Teachers have always discouraged that answer saying to my sons, "Choose something else. Only a few lucky people can make a career out of sports." I want to thank Ms. Rigsbee for not telling my children to choose something else. Ms. Rigsbee told them that if they worked hard, got good grades, and treated people the way they wanted to be treated that the sky was the limit. She incorporated books that fostered my children's love of sports. This taught them that being a professional athlete required more than just talent. One of my sons told me that he needed to know how to read so that he would know and understand his NFL contract. I knew this was due to Ms. Rigsbee, another unsung hero.

Please accept this letter as my personal recommendation for Ms. Cindi Rigsbee for The National Teacher of the Year. I cannot think of a more deserving candidate.

Humbly Submitted,
Tara Pittman