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District's 2018 Teacher of the Year is Riverview High English teacher
Event also honored first Alumni of Distinction and Ignite Innovation teacher

SARASOTA, Dec. 13, 2017 – Es Swihart, an English teacher at Riverview High School, was named the 2018 Sarasota County Teacher of the Year at the Ignite Education event, a celebration hosted by the Education Foundation of Sarasota County. This is the second year in a row Superintendent Todd Bowden has presented this honor to a teacher from Riverview.

Swihart, named from among three finalists at the annual awards ceremony, will represent all Sarasota County educators at events throughout the 2018 calendar year and will serve as the district's nominee for state Teacher of the Year. Her fellow finalists were Venice Elementary fifth-grade teacher Bethany Burnett and Booker Middle math teacher Allison Cohen. The 37 other Teachers of the Year representing local schools were recognized at the event.

The Education Foundation of Sarasota County produces the event in partnership with the Sarasota County School District. This year's event was held at The Westin Sarasota. Also announced at Ignite Education was the first Sarasota County Alumni of Distinction, awarded to James Tollerton, a community leader and the owner and operator of a local independent insurance and benefits company. Robbie Wolf, a plumbing technology teacher at Suncoast Technical College, received the first Ignite Innovation Award.

Accepting the district Teacher of the Year award, Swihart said, "Teaching is about helping students who are struggling to find out who they are and helping them find a space to be themselves. It's our job to help them grow." She thanked the audience of teachers and family members, administrators and guests and told them, "When you support teachers, you are supporting students."

Swihart has taught for 11 years, five of them in Sarasota County. She teaches English Literature and "English 1" to Pre-International Baccalaureate students. She holds a bachelors' degrees in English and theater performance from the University of Florida and a master's of English education from the University of South Florida-St. Petersburg.

She said she is "passionate about teaching, learning and exploring the arts and writing to understand why these modes of expression are so powerful.

"I believe stories are powerful tools for connection and bettering our understanding of the world and ourselves," Swihart said. "I want my students to be comfortable expressing who they are — their authentic selves."

(MORE)

The Alumni of Distinction Award is designed to honor a graduate of Sarasota County Schools who has distinguished himself in his field and in serving the community. James Tollerton was selected from among many outstanding nominees. He served as the first president of the Board of the Education Foundation of Sarasota County, established the Sarasota Memorial Hospital Excel Employee Appreciation Fund and serves on several local boards, including The Ringling and the Florida State College of Medicine Sarasota Advisory Board.

Tollerton was raised in Sarasota and attended Southside Elementary, Brookside Junior High and Sarasota High School, graduating in 1964. He served in student government, attending Boys State, and coached pee wee football. He returned to Sarasota after graduating from Florida State University and started his insurance career. Tollerton is known as “the great networker” because of his willingness to help make connections to anyone who asks.

“I had great teachers here in Sarasota County who made a difference in my life,” said Tollerton. “I thank God for the ability to give back to this wonderful community.”

The Ignite Innovation award is given to a Teacher of the Year from one of 40 Sarasota County Schools Teacher of the Year finalists who has shown innovation in the classroom. This can be demonstrated through using technology, utilizing cross-disciplinary methods of teaching or offering an interesting hands-on experience. In addition to being recognized at the Ignite Education celebration, the Ignite Innovation recipient will receive a custom interactive workshop for his class, provided by Microsoft.

The first Ignite Innovation winner, Robbie Wolf, has taught plumbing technology and apprenticeship at Suncoast Technical College since 2010. A graduate of State College of Florida Manatee-Sarasota, Wolf has owned Cy Blue Plumbing, his family’s business, since 1985. He brings more than 28 years of hands-on experience to teaching the trade.

Alayna Chavez, the first female graduate of the STC plumbing program, presented the award to Wolf. She thanked him for being an inspiration to her and helping her realize she could be successful in the male-dominated field. Photos of Chavez with her pink plumbing truck, shown on the big screen at the event, helped prove the point.

Ron DiPillo, executive director of Career, Technical and Adult Education for Sarasota County Schools, said Wolf “demonstrates excellent classroom management skills as well as instructional strategies that have a positive impact on his student’s achievements. He has dedicated much effort to influencing the careers of his students after program completion.”

Wolf said, “I believe being a leader is not about standing on a pedestal barking orders, but being in the trenches and leading by example.”

Jennifer Vigne, President of the Education Foundation of Sarasota County, closed the program by speaking directly to the teachers, “You truly go the distance each and every day. It is our hope that our community continues to recognize the value of teachers and we find ways to continue lifting you up.”

About Teacher of the Year

The Teacher of the Year program recognizes educators in Sarasota County who exemplify dedication to student learning and innovative instruction. The program is co-produced by the Sarasota County School District and the Education Foundation of Sarasota County and is made possible through the funding and support of community partners. The district Teacher of the Year, Es Swihart, will receive a \$2,500 cash award from the Education Foundation, sponsored by Sunset Automotive Group; the two runners-up, Bethany Burnett and Allison Cohen, will each receive \$1,250. Swihart will represent Sarasota County Schools at the Florida Department of Education-Macy's Teacher of the Year program and will serve as a spokesperson for and representative of the teaching profession at various events until the next district Teacher of the Year is chosen.

About the Education Foundation of Sarasota County

The Education Foundation of Sarasota County is an independent partner working to advance philanthropic support for Sarasota County Schools. Its mission is to enhance the potential of students, promote excellence in teaching and inspire innovation in education. Guided by the belief that education changes lives, the Education Foundation strives to match each donor's passion with high-impact projects created to ensure students graduate with purpose and are prepared for a post-secondary pathway. The Education Foundation of Sarasota County and its philanthropic investors are champions for students, teachers, and schools. For more information on how to be a champion for education, visit EdFoundationSRQ.org.

PHOTO CAPTIONS:

1. Riverview High English teacher Es Swihart reacts to being named the 2018 Sarasota County Teacher of the Year as her colleagues celebrate.
2. Superintendent Todd Bowden, at left, chats with Distinguished Alumni Award winner James Tollerton
3. At right, Ignite Innovation Award winner and Suncoast Technical College Plumbing Technology teacher Robbie Wolf shares the moment with former student Alayna Chavez.