

Rieke School teacher wins Fulbright Award, faces a year in England

By Jillian Daley
The Southwest Portland Post

Mary Rieke Elementary School teacher Jeff Sturges and his family were spending spring break at his mother in law's Arizona home when he got the email.

Sturges, his wife Rebecca and their two children were about to head to a spring training baseball game on a sunny day in late March.

Sturges paused to check his messages when he noticed a letter from the Institute of International Education, which administers the Fulbright Classroom Teacher Exchange on behalf of the U.S. Department of State.

The letter said he had 10 days to accept an invitation to participate in the exchange program, an opportunity to trade jobs and residences with a teacher in Britain.

"I just screamed: 'Rebecca, you better come in and view this right now,'" Sturges said.

"And I said: 'How do you feel about moving to Melton Mowbray in England?' and she was like: 'What? Oh my God, oh my God' and started screaming. Then, my mother in law came in, then the kids. We were very excited, very excited."

He leaves for his yearlong gig this August. He is among 41 U.S. teachers offered exchanges for this coming school year, according to Fulbright Teacher

Exchange Program records.

Sturges soon learned the honor was huge but comes with big changes and some sacrifices: His life and his counterpart Robert Pearce's life are very different.

The Sturges family of four will squeeze into Pearce's three-bedroom terrace house in Melton Mowbray. There is a washing machine in the kitchen, no dryer because the British line-dry their clothes, and no dishwasher.

Sturges' wife will leave her job at the Oregon Convention Center to be by his side, making them a one-income family.

The British school where Sturges will work, in a village called Waltham, was built in 1847 and has less than 100 students, Sturges said. He will be one of four teachers.

Pearce, a single man, will occupy the Sturges family's four-bedroom home. Mary Rieke Elementary, built in the 1960s, had 420 students last school year, and the school has about 20 teachers, not counting teaching assistants, Sturges said.

Sturges is the first Mary Rieke Elementary teacher to receive the honor and one of 42 Portland Public Schools to participate since the program began.

He and Oregon Episcopal School eighth grade Spanish teacher Tessa Daniel are the only teachers from Portland selected to participate this year.

More than 14,000 U.S. teachers have participated in the Classroom Teacher Exchange, one of many Fulbright

programs, since it was established in 1946 under legislation that former Sen. J. William Fulbright of Arkansas introduced.

Seven countries participate, and Sturges chose Britain because it was the only country where he could teach primary school and did not have to be fluent in the country's mother tongue.

Applicants to the program must have at least 5 years of classroom teaching experience, and must demonstrate a seriousness of purpose and a commitment to the program.

"They want men and women who will make a difference," Sturges said.

Sturges said he hopes to become a better teacher by putting himself in a new environment-- to find out what he is doing right and what he could improve. "Life is about taking chances and opportunities," he said.

Sturges, whose parents, grandmother and sister are educators, previously worked in the food industry, choosing to follow in the family tradition a decade ago.



Mary Rieke Elementary School teacher Jeff Sturges is one of 41 teachers in the U.S. to be awarded a Fulbright Classroom Teacher Exchange. Sturges accepted and will be teaching in England this coming school year. (Post photo by Jillian Daley)

He was inspired to take on a classroom full of children after quitting his job to stay at home for a year when his daughter was born.

Armed with a bachelor's degree from the University of California-Santa Cruz, he enrolled in a Masters in Education program at Portland State University. He graduated summa cum laude.

He's now been teaching for eight years, six of which he spent at Mary Rieke, where he seems to have made a good impression, at least on fourth-grader LilyAnna Chin.

"It feels like I can trust him, and it's good for everyone to know that he won an award for something he really cares about," said Chin.

Rieke School principal Andrea Porter is excited for the knowledge he will bring back, and Porter said this is a bright spot amid a mass of budget cuts at Portland Public Schools.

"There's so much bad stuff going on," Porter said. "This is a really good thing, so we're very proud of him, and we're very excited for ourselves. It's a win-win."

Former Terwilliger School building purchased by Montessori school

Sunstone Montessori School has purchased the former Terwilliger School building at 6318 SW Corbett Ave. from the Portland School District, Sunstone principal Cathy Newman told the South Portland Neighborhood Association last month.

The school is moving to the property after eight years in the Bridlemile neighborhood, Newman said.

The building had previously been leased to the Portland French School, and its relationship with its neighbors was sometimes strained.

The private school installed fences to curtail access to open areas previously used by neighbors, and its policies on after-hours use of the building were so restrictive that the neighborhood association, which had been meeting there, sought other quarters.

Newman said she welcomed use of the grounds by neighbors, and that she had had a volleyball net installed in the front yard.

The principal was somewhat more equivocal about another issue: a desire by some neighbors to use the yard as an off-leash area for dogs.

"I'm a dog owner myself, but this is where children will be playing," Newman said. At the least, dog owners will be required to clean up after themselves, she said.

- Lee Perlman

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