

KeizerCommunity

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McNary senior honored for making U-turn

By **MATT RAWLINGS**
Of the Keizertimes

Since 1994, the Salem-Keizer School District holds the Turnaround Achievement Awards every year to recognize middle and high school students that demonstrate effort, commitment and perseverance in the face of adversity — recipients of this award show improvement in their academics, as well as their attitude and behavior.

One student from each middle and high school in the district is selected for the award. When it came time for assistant principal Susanne Stefani to nominate someone from McNary High, Melissa Morgan was the name that stood above the rest.

“Melissa was one that jumped out in our minds as someone who has really turned around,” Stefani said. “She may have not had a solid start here, but she always had staff that believed in her and somehow stepped through it.”

“She just decided that it was time to grow up.”

On Tuesday, May 7, Morgan was officially recognized as McNary’s Turnaround student award winner during a ceremony at the Keizer Community Center.

“When I first got the award I had a mix of emotions. I didn’t feel like I deserved it. I felt like there’s other kids out there that have been through worse,” Morgan said. “After receiving the award and thinking on it, I started thinking of all the stupid stuff I’ve done and then I thought about myself now and I see the difference that everyone else sees.”

Stefani and Morgan’s first interaction came in the discipline office when Morgan was a freshman. Though their relationship might have gotten off to a rocky start, Morgan has developed a great rapport with her assistant principal.

“Having Susanne in my corner this year really pushed me to try and be my best because she’s never scared to call me out when I mess up. I truly appreciate all the support she’s given me,” Morgan said.

Along with improving her academics, Morgan has also been in the McNary girls basketball program for the last three years. This season was her Morgan’s first year on the varsity team — which she credits as playing a big role in her in her turnaround.

“Being involved with basketball and these girls helped me out more than words can describe. They are my family and I’ll always hold them in

my heart,” Morgan said. “The girls were always there for me and never gave up on me. They supported me through everything and never judged my past.”

“The girls always made sure I was doing good in my classes and in school. They helped calm me down if I was ever angry and wanted to yell at someone. They helped mold me into the person I am today.”

But arguably the most important thing she did all year wasn’t in the classroom or on the basketball court.

Back in December, Morgan was riding with some of her teammates back to school after attending a breakfast at Willamette University. The girls stopped at Dutch Bros to get coffee, but on the way back to the school, Morgan spotted a special needs student at McNary that looked to be in a potentially dangerous situation.

“While I was looking at her, I noticed a guy walking behind her and he grabbed a shirt and put it around his head. I remember thinking like ‘what the heck’ and then I just got this weird feeling that something wasn’t right,” Morgan said.

As the man was approaching this student, Morgan and her teammates sprung into action



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by driving up to the student and yelling for her to get in the car just before the man reached to grab her.

“I got really nervous because he was reaching towards her to get in the car,” Morgan said. “I remember putting my car keys in my knuckles and unbuckled (the seat belt) and was ready to jump out of the car and help her if he did grab her.”

Morgan and her teammates got the student safely back to the school, where they immediately told office staff what had just occurred.

“We got the police on it and they ended up confronting him,” Stefani said. “He did have convictions and was a scary dude ... We just were complementing



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the girls for making that call in the moment and choosing to do the right thing.”

Morgan has defied the odds to be a success both inside and outside of school, and it has been easy for the McNary staff to take notice.

“Remarkable doesn’t even begin to describe Melissa. I have

seen this young woman undergo an amazing transformation in the three years that I have known her,” McNary teacher Rebecca Chrowl said. “I couldn’t be more proud of how far she has come and what she

has accomplished during her time at McNary. I will for sure miss her when she graduates, but I know that she will use her powers for good and will influence others with her sparkle.”

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