

Collier: Will 'miss the kiddos'

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"I have elderly parents to care for and grandchildren to play with, I want to travel, and I don't want to work until I'm not able to do any of that," she said. "My husband actually wanted me to retire last year, but I said, 'No, I think one more year.'"

"Holy moly, what a year." Needless to say, June will look nothing like it usually does for Collier. And the parts that do will be a little more emotional.

Such as the last day of school, when she and the staff at Hilda Lahti still plan on singing "Happy Trails" to the students, whether it's online or in person.

Other than that, Collier had planned on attending some ball games and track meets in her final spring as a principal, and of course taking part in her 44th straight Astoria Scandinavian Midsummer Festival.

There may or may not be a retirement party — no big deal, Collier said. She said she will just "miss the kiddos."

And there have been a lot of them.

"I taught kindergarten to fourth grade, in two different districts," she said. "I started in Astoria as a second grade teacher, went to Warrenton and taught there for 13 or 14 years."

She was hired as an assistant principal in the Warrenton district, and in all spent 23 years there.

Collier went back to Astoria for two years to work at the district office as a special programs director.

Then "the position in Knappa came open, and that's what I wanted to do."

The rest of the spring and summer of 2020 was not what she was expecting.

"Not by a long shot," she said. "I don't know what I'm going to do. June is usually so crazy busy."

"The Scandinavian festival is out for this year, which I had been involved in since I moved here in 1977," said Collier, formerly Leila Koskela. "My role has kind of changed over the years. I usually sing the Finnish national anthem, because I'm fluent in Finnish. But right now I'm on the princess committee as the chairperson, so I feel kind of weird asking myself to sing."

"So I have to find other singers. And that's a chore, finding people who can sing in their native (Scandinavian) languages."

For over three decades, Collier's main focus the rest of the year has been on local

education.

"All 35 years in Clatsop County," said Collier, who was born in Minnesota, then moved with her family to Astoria her sophomore year of high school. She graduated from Astoria, then went to Clatsop Community College and Western Oregon State College.

"I graduated from Western in '84 and got married two weeks later," she said.

Her husband is from Clatsop County, so "we knew this was where we were going to be."

Collier can't always remember the names of the thousands of students she has taught, but she knows the faces.

"You see them in the stores or reconnect with them on Facebook," she said. "Or they bring their kids to be enrolled in your building or hear that they're becoming grandparents, and you're going, 'Oh my goodness.' I have been here a long time!"

As for her upcoming retirement, "I wasn't planning on any parties, and I don't know if anyone else was," she said. "Parties aren't the biggest thing for me. I think the hardest thing is not having closure with staff, students and families."

"The kids are resilient. I'm sure they will be just fine, and the staff, too. They're pretty darned awesome," Collier said. "I just wanted that closure! But it is what it is."

Normal end-of-the-year events such as "graduation, eighth grade promotions, letting kids find out who their new teachers are ... it's those little traditions and pieces of closure that we will miss this year," she said. "The kids will be resilient though. I'm the one stressing out."

Collier admits to being "a linear person. I like things organized, but I didn't go into retirement with any predesigned notions. I definitely want to travel at some point. That will just have to take a back seat."

Where there's a will there's a way, so the kids at Hilda Lahti may still hear the staff singing to them on the final day of school.

"We have a cute little tradition that we do," Collier said. "We sing 'Happy Trails' to the kids on the last day, as the buses are leaving. My staff is so creative and resilient, they'll find a way to still do that. That has been such a tradition, we can't break it. We all stand out there, sing 'Happy Trails' and bawl our eyes out."

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