

AWARDS from page 1A

to (her) community, including community projects, charity work and advocacy.”

McNeill is a member of Siuslaw Elementary’s Kindness Club, originally founded by a student, which welcomes new students and their families on their first day at school. McNeill stepped forward to create a gift bag filled with local information and coupons, and some of her own favorite things to do around town.

“Claire’s ingenuity and thoughtfulness through her Welcome Bag project is what made her stand out for this award,” said FCPTA Treasurer Diane McCalmont. “She took the seed of compassion from being a member of Kindness Club, and came up with the idea of making new students feel welcome on their first day of school. As the new student arrives, Claire not only provides them a tour of the school, but gives them a bag full of coupons to be used at local business and information about what there is to do around Florence.”

In the nomination packet for the award, one student wrote, “Moving to a new school can be scary, but Claire made me feel welcome. ... Claire is a great role model for all students.”

FCPTA presented McNeill her award at a small ceremony at Siuslaw Elementary in May.

Yesterday, June 9, the PTA again gathered at the elementary school, this time to honor “one of Oregon’s best and brightest,” according to Oregon PTA. Surrounded by a 25-person crowd consisting of her colleagues, school administration, friends and her family, Sarles received the certificate for being named Oregon PTA Teacher of the Year. Additional people waited outside to congratulate her.

In a video posted to Facebook, Oregon PTA President Kristi Dille said, “We are honored to award an amazing teacher who has focused on raising leaders, followers and musicians in her students. ... Making a true difference with children and within the community is inspiring and deserves recognition.”

Sarles, originally from Nashville, Tenn., has been a music teacher at Siuslaw for two school years. Before moving here, she did volunteer work in the local and global communities and coordinated music festivals, directed musicians and conducted concerts. She has taught internationally in Kabul, Afghanistan, and

Kampala, Uganda.

Dille went on to say that Sarles has consistent contact with all 600 students at Siuslaw Elementary, something that was echoed by FCPTA members on Tuesday.

According to McCalmont, “Amanda brings a contagious energy to all aspects of her position. She has brought a fresh and positive approach to her music classes, as well as to her team commitments. She is loved by her students and respected by her colleagues. It’s evident that she genuinely cares about every one of the nearly 600 students that she teaches each week.”

Fourth-grade teacher Angela DeSarro read from a letter she submitted, “Mrs. Sarles’ investment in our students is evident when walking with her down school hallways or running with her at Miller Park. She has reached celebrity status with our students who are overjoyed when they see her. ... She doesn’t just know the name of each student, she knows about each student. She has invested her time and heart to learn their individual stories. She knows and praises their strengths while also recognizing their needs, and challenges them to be their best self.”

It’s a big job for a teacher who has only been at Siuslaw since the fall of 2018.

Siuslaw Elementary Principal Mike Harklerode said Sarles was “the dream candidate” for the music teacher position.

“Every now and again over my 10 years as principal I have met a real ‘game changer’ when interviewing prospective teachers. Amanda was one such candidate,” he said.

In his letter in support of Sarles’ nomination, he wrote, “Prior to meeting Amanda, I presumed a music teacher’s primary role was to inspire an appreciation and basic understanding of music. I now see how much bigger the role can be. Amanda views it her calling to lay the initial foundation of skills and musical fluency. She has shown her colleagues, her students and me how music can enhance all aspects of life.”

Fifth-grader Emma Meier provided testimony about Sarles, saying, “She makes sure that no matter what level of learning you’re on, you get what you need to learn. ... She makes me look forward every day to go to music. Our school is a better place with her here.”

At school, Sarles is a member of the Positive Behavior Support Team, a teacher-leader and part of the Character Education



Oregon PTA Teacher of the Year Amanda Sarles, her husband Gary and their son Connor

program. She plans field trips to Florence Events Center and Eugene’s Hult Center, working with local music festivals and programs to expand knowledge of music beyond the school building.

“Her irreplaceable energy and love for kids has become contagious in our school,” Harklerode said. “Her colleagues have been inspired to give more themselves and to expect more from their students. Our kids have been inspired to rise to any challenge, knowing that they will be supported.”

Beyond teaching, the Oregon PTA Teacher of the Year also has to make a difference in the community. Part of that is partnering with the local PTA.

“Mrs. Sarles is a leader amongst team programs at SES and through her volunteer works outside of our school community,” said McCalmont. “She is a strong supporter of our local PTA and has coordinated the PTA Brave Kids Talent Show the past two years.”

She has also worked with Osburn on the PTA’s annual Color-A-Thon fun run and on other programs.

On Tuesday, Sarles stood in the middle of a loose semi-circle of her colleagues as FCPTA read speeches and presented her with her certificate from Oregon PTA.

“I have so much to say, and I just want to say thank

you,” she said.

She went on to thank the administrators for their encouragement, her colleagues who support and serve her with their students and all those who helped make the award possible. One of those was Dr. Melissa Brunkan, one of her instructors at University of Oregon who was able to attend the ceremony.

“Awards like this don’t happen in a vacuum,” Sarles said. “This is not just an award that I’m getting — this is representative of our community here and how we hold one another up as we teach our kids so they can have successful futures no matter where they end up.”

She talked about the importance of music and the joy of helping kids learn — not just music, but how to problem solve.

“I take great responsibility in my role here,” she said. “I get the privilege of seeing kids grow, learn and flourish year after year, month after month. It’s an honor, and it’s a privilege, to see them overcome challenges. They look at me saying, ‘I can’t do this and I never will,’ to a few months later to them going, ‘I can play this piece of music.’”

Sarles also works with adults, this time through the choir at Florence United Methodist Church.

“I have watched her work with our choir, a group of singers ranging from pre-

teen to people in their 80s,” were working hard to create new ways of teaching and connecting with students during the pandemic, FCPTA felt it was important to recognize their efforts,” McCalmont said. “We gave away free gifts, wrote and mailed thank you cards to each one, provided donuts and coffee to the bus drivers, and created appreciation signs around the schools.”

During that week, Sarles was instrumental in organizing the “Home Teacher Appreciation” video made by school staff and shared on social media.

“We are very fortunate to have such a strong community of supporters with our FCPTA,” she said.

This spring, FCPTA also continued its support of local high school seniors by reviewing applications and awarding four \$500 scholarships to Nina Aaron, Layla Blakely, Jonah Jarman and Chloe Madden.

At the end of the awards presentation at Siuslaw Elementary, Osburn said, “Along with our middle and high school, we have a great community and an amazing district. ... PTA is happy to be a part of it.”

For more information about FCPTA, visit www.facebook.com/Florence-CommunityPta/.

To all the winners of the Oregon PTAs annual awards, the group said, “We value the work you are doing in your communities and the impact you have on those around you. Our sincerest thanks! We love to show appreciation for what you all do every day. Congratulations to all our winners and thank you for your continued work.”

For information on Oregon PTA, visit www.oregonpta.org.

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