

**FLORES:**

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proud.” Russell said, adding Flores celebrated her children’s accomplishments by dedicating a wall in their Hermiston home to certificates.

She also expected a lot of her students, Russell said.

“She had very high expectations and was very determined to see all of her kids succeed,” Russell said, adding Flores recently re-started an after-school reading class for her students who needed help. “She went that extra mile. Her life was so busy, but she was willing to put in that extra time for her kids. She was just going all the time, going, going, going.”

Other colleagues also said how dedicated Flores was to her students.

McNary Heights Principal Bob Lorence, who has overseen Flores during her eight years, said the first-grade teacher was a tremendous asset to the school and community because she was Hispanic and taught in the native language literacy classroom.

“She related to the families and became one of our biggest resources to connecting our Hispanic families to the education system,” Lorence said, adding, even if students were no longer in her class, she would help their families by providing information about various services available. “She probably took as many phone calls in the day as the office did. She really helped make that connection to the community.”

Lorence said Flores was also an excellent teacher, determined to have her students learn how to read. When the first-grade staff team met with him earlier this year, he advised them to work hard with their children so they could pass the spring reading test. Flores, he said, came up to him afterward and told him all of

her students would be ready to meet their reading goals by the winter-testing period. All but two of them did, and those who didn’t were very close, Lorence said.

McNary Heights Vice Principal Rick Cotterell, who worked with Flores for two years but knew her for longer through his wife, who teaches at the school, said Flores was a very caring, very straight-forward person, who always spoke her mind out of love and concern.

“It takes a special person to be a teacher, but she was more than that — she was a special teacher,” he said. “What she did for us, it was beyond what she did in the classroom. That’s what we really haven’t felt the impact of yet.”

Gloria Chase, who substituted for Flores the last four years and completed her student teaching in Flores’ classroom, echoed Russell by saying Flores was determined to have her students succeed and meet their reading goals.

“She was strict, but at the same time, she was so loving, and the kids loved her,” Chase said, adding Flores always made time for her students and would often buy necessities for them if she saw they were without. “She was like a mother to those kids.”

Flores’ coworkers said their friend cared for them inside the wall of the school — where one of her favorite phrases was “I’ve got your back” — and remembered them outside the classroom, as well.

First-grade teacher Charlotte Engelhart said Flores always came back from trips with gifts for her teaching teammates that were thoughtfully selected to suit their personalities.

“She really cared about people,” Engelhart said. “She stopped everything to take care of people.”

Flores, who Engelhart said called everybody by their last name, a habit that was adopted by all the teachers in the first-grade



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Signs with words in English and Spanish outside McNary Heights Elementary School honored first-grade teacher Elisabet Flores, who died in a car crash April 11.



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Umatilla first-grade teacher Elisabet Flores, second from left, stands with a group of her McNary Heights colleagues on a school Halloween dress-up day. Her friends say Flores took dress-up days very seriously and made sure everybody wore a costume. Flores died April 11 in a car crash.

wing, also helped make things fun in the first-grade wing. Russell, Chase and Engelhart all said Flores was bubbly, outgoing, funny and enjoyed playing pranks upon occasion. She was also a big fan of the school’s dress-up days.

First-grade teacher Ann Johnson said Flores took those days very seriously, especially on Halloween.

“Some of my best memories of her were dress-up

days,” Johnson said, adding Flores always had a costume or something special to wear. “She would make sure we would follow suit, and if we didn’t, she’d have something ready for us.”

Russell said she will best remember Flores’ love for God, the Christian concerts they attended together,

*“It takes a special person to be a teacher, but she was more than that — she was a special teacher.”*

Rick Cotterell

McNary Heights Elementary vice principal

er, her humor and laughter. “She was a fun person to be around,” Russell said. “She could make you laugh at the drop of a string, making me laugh.”

Everyone, however, said McNary Heights was missing that laughter this week and was instead transformed into a somber place filled with tears.

It was also a place of love, however. Umatilla Superintendent Heidi Sipe said the outpouring of support from the community was incredible even as Umatilla teachers and staff at all schools grieved.

She said, in addition to InterMountain Education Service District crisis response staff who were in classrooms Monday, retired district employees, including former Clara Brownell Middle School Principal Diana Veleke, came to McNary Heights and spent the day with staff and students.

“The McNary staff, and all the Umatilla staff, I think, when you work with kids as closely as we do and in a community of our size, you really become a second family,” Sipe said.

The support didn’t stop in Umatilla, however. Sipe said staff from Hermiston’s West Park, Desert View and Highland Hills elementary schools prepared a dinner, breakfast and snacks for teachers to help ease the strain as parent-teacher conferences also took place this week. Cotterell said the Irrigon senior/junior school sent flowers, as did an area insurance company,

and many others passed on thoughtful messages throughout the week.

Sipe said parents in the school district were also very supportive and understanding, adding many agreed to reschedule parent-teacher conferences, even rearranging their work days, so Umatilla staff could attend Flores’ funeral services Thursday. Many parents, she said, also attended.

“I think it’s just phenomenal,” Sipe said, adding it shows how caring the greater community is in difficult times. “It’s sad that it’s times of tragedy when the greatness of the community is really highlighted, but it seems to be true.”

Although McNary Heights staff gathered Sunday afternoon at the school to begin the grieving process, Lorence said, the mourning period will be long for everyone, including him. He said he has to unlock the door to Flores’ classroom every day, and he is reminded of the school’s loss every morning.

“It’s really kind of a one-day-at-a-time thing,” he said. “The big focus is her three kids still in the system. We want to make sure they’re taken care of.”

Cotterell echoed those sentiments but said the school will also heal by carrying on Flores’ mission.

“Everything she did was with care and concern, and the best way we can honor her is to show the same care and concerns for our students every day,” Cotterell said.

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