

Kindergarten teacher retiring after fulfilling her 'bucket list' for school

A teacher who never went to kindergarten herself and didn't think she would ever instruct the grade level because she can't play the piano is retiring this month (June 2015) after more than 40 years in education and 26 of those in the same kindergarten classroom.

Kaye Katsis, known as "Mrs. K" by students and staff at Butterfield Elementary School, said she has fulfilled a bucket list of desires for the Chino Hills school and is ready to move on to another chapter in her life.

"I've said one more year for four years," Mrs. Katsis said. "Everything on my check list is done, so I feel good about leaving."

On that list was getting a web-based assessment for kindergartners introduced at Butterfield, having steps installed on a slippery slope near the kindergarten play area, completing a sidewalk around the playground, and getting its play equipment refurbished.

She is particularly excited about the online assessment, which has students matching illustrations to text. One of the assessments involves symbols of California, such as the state animal, the California Grizzly Bear.

Using computers in the classroom is one of the most exciting changes she has seen in her 42 years teaching. She laments that there isn't more cutting-edge technology for students to use, such as tablets.

"They're into it," she said. "And I'm not at the board with my back to them."

She uses five of her own online devices in her classroom to give her students computer access. One of the software applications she uses in class has students tapping a cartoon image that takes them to a video of a real-life version of that image.

Among the accomplishments of which she is most proud, is writing a proposal to get steps installed on that steep slope near the kindergarten playground. The new entrance to the kindergarten yard was installed this spring, as well as completion of the sidewalk around the play area.

About four years ago, she was instrumental in getting safer kindergarten playground equipment for the school, and she has arranged for an Eagle Scout to clean up playground tricycles this summer.

Mrs. Katsis, who was born in California and previously lived in Mississippi, never went to kindergarten because it was not mandatory at the time. She taught in Texas before joining the Chino Valley Unified School District in 1984 as a first/second grade teacher and later kindergarten teacher at Walnut Avenue Elementary School in Chino. She was the second staff member - after the secretary - assigned to Butterfield when it opened in 1989. "I thought they built this school for me," she said, explaining that she used to drive by it every day while it was under construction, from her former home in Yorba Linda.

The Corona resident has been in the same classroom at Butterfield for the last 26 years. "This has always been my happy place," she said, motioning to her colorfully decorated room.

Although she didn't know how to play the piano, Mrs. Katsis learned the autoharp to accompany her kindergartners when they sang.

She was named Teacher of the Year in the district in the 1999/2000 school year.

Her plans for retirement: "I'll never drive in peak traffic again. I'll travel the United States, see National Parks and my family, quilt, and exercise," she said.

Mrs. Katsis credits the people she has worked with at Butterfield for making her time there so great. "The people who work here are terrific, they give 110 percent," she said. "Our parents are amazing, so involved; that makes it so much more meaningful."

One of the parents who got involved became a good friend of Mrs. Katsis. Parent Jackie Mikuljan, whose daughter was in Mrs. Katsis' kindergarten class more than a decade ago, has been helping the teacher in her class for the last six years.

Mrs. Katsis has high praise for the team of kindergarten teachers at Butterfield, as they do for her.

"I can't say enough wonderful things about her," kindergarten teacher Tina Bozikis-Coccia said. "It's because of her that I'm at this school teaching kindergarten. Kaye is artistic and incredibly intelligent. And even though she thinks she should retire, she still has great energy."

"I am like this to Kaye," Ms. Bozikis-Coccia said, bowing lowly with both hands stretched in front of her.