

OCA teacher retires after 43 years

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Mrs. Laura Coro

LEICESTER — If Laura Coro had to share just one tip in her 43 years of teaching at the Leicester elementary school, it would be this:

“You got to snag them while they’re young. You have to get them to like subjects in those early years. Once they’re hooked, you’ve got them learning.”

Mrs. Coro should know. She has been “snagging” kids at the Leicester school since she joined the teaching ranks there in 1978.

She actually started teaching as a Title 1 instructor in Special Education for the Whiting Elementary, but after a few weeks there she was moved to a vacancy at Leicester Central School, as it was then known. In Leicester she was also teaching reading and special education and shortly thereafter, teaching 3rd-, 4th- and 5th grade students. More recently the school was consolidated under the Otter Valley Unified Union district with the Leicester facility now called the Otter Creek Academy and teaching the older elementary grades, while Sudbury has K-2 grades.

But for Mrs. Coro, she’s been teaching her students pretty much nonstop the better part of two generations and loving most every minute, especially when she was able to teach special units or projects, which she loved to do in adventurous ways to get the students excited.

It was called expeditionary learning, she said, because it was like going on a field trip, which sometimes they did and others times they did it in the classroom or outside on the school grounds. One time, she recalled, she and her students built a teepee outside while studying Native American history, and built a small fire inside the teepee to show how they were able to stay warm, even though having a fire in the teepee might have been against school district policy.

“The kids loved the unit and really got involved in that history,” she recalled, adding that mixing real things like showing the students what it was like living in a teepee made the history come alive.

In another unit, she and her students would collect Monarch caterpillars and chrysalises for their Butterfly Garden and keep them in the room until the pupa hatch — at which time they would have butterflies fluttering around the room and the students would identify males and females and discuss the caterpillars’ life cycle.



Mrs. Laura Coro, a teacher of 43 years at the Leicester Central School and now Otter Creek Academy, will retire at the end of this year. She is shown here with her 3rd- 4th-5th grade students. Reporter photo/Angelo Lynn

In one science unit on solar balloons, Mrs. Coro had a bit of a scare. It was December, she recalled, and they had blown up a large balloon which was tethered outside but it expanded too much, and almost escaped their clutches, causing several moments of panic and exertion for her relatively small frame to bring it back under control.

"I was so scared I was going to get in trouble," Mrs. Coro remembered, though she rarely did.

In singing the praises of her school principles, the veteran teacher said they were always very supportive of creative ways to engage the students and of what teachers wanted to do.

"They almost never said no to a request," she said, with her eyes still full of sparkle and excitement at some of the projects she did with her students. She recalled taking them on field trips to Middlebury College to learn about solar energy, and going on nature walks with Otter Valley Union High School's Joshua Hardt, who ran the ecological Moosalamoo Center, or going to the OV high school on different occasions during a six-week chemistry unit.

In another unit on the human body for a health section, Mrs. Coro and her class were studying the heart and she gathered several hearts of various animals for display in the classroom.

"I grew up in Orwell and always knew a lot of area hunters, so I'd give them a call, and call the game warden, and get these various animal hearts and then ask the kids whose heart it was," she recalled. "One day Dr. Bill Mathis (then superintendent of RNESU) came into the classroom in his three-piece suit and a veterinarian and we dissected a heart. I think he liked it, but I did get in trouble for using formaldehyde (even though we had it closed tight), so we had to switch to denatured alcohol."

"We did that for several years," Mrs. Coro remembered, recalling that it was a favorite unit for her students.

Another favorite memory is the annual Memorial Day Parade.

"One year I asked Principal Ellie Holsman if I could do a Memorial Day Program connected with vets at the cemetery just down the street and she said sure. So I got every student to do a skit or a poem about the occasion and we'd walk down to the cemetery in a parade bringing flowers to put on the veterans' graves, and our own students would play taps. We started it 14 years ago or more. I hope somebody takes it over. I don't want to see it fade away."

FINAL SCHOOL BELL

Not wanting those years at the school to fade away is on Mrs. Coro's mind these days as she has announced she will retire at the end of this school year as she turns 66.

"I still love it all," she said. "Just making that decision to retire was tough," she added, though noting that her husband, George, recently retired from his own business as a carpenter and they wanted to spend more time together. George, she recalled, "was my carpenter in the school room the entire 43 years. He was a real good sport about it, and loved helping build some of the projects I did with the kids."

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Born on a dairy farm in Orwell with eight siblings, Mrs. Coro still calls Orwell her home and noted that all eight of her siblings went to college and three ended up as teachers — one brother who teaches at West Rutland and another who teaches in California.

Through it all, she's noticed several major changes in teaching.

"It used to be that teachers were on their own with bigger classrooms of stUdents, but today there are more para-educators, more diagnoses of students with problems, and more principals guiding the ship," she said. "And it's all needed," Coro added, explaining that many more students today face troubles that they didn't have 30-40 years ago.

But many of the rewards are the same.

"It's exciting to see when the kids are successful in their work," Coro said, "when they can present and they get all excited to show what they've been doing. They can be so proud, and that's just wonderful to see."

Of her time spent at just the one school, Mrs. Coro said she felt extremely fortunate.

"I like the community because I felt I was helping teach their kids, and I just wanted to be sure they got everything they had coming to them. Even though we didn't have all the resources of some of the bigger schools, we all fought hard to get the students everything they needed and we were mostly successful... We do good things in these little schools. We can do things here that the bigger schools can't."

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Asked what parents could do to help their students, Mrs. Coro was plain: “Support them,” she said. “Just turn off the TV and read with them. Go over their homework with them and show them that schoolwork matters. Get involved. Come to a child’s teacher conference.”

Like many things the COVID-19 pandemic upset, holding school events at night and getting together with parents at the schools is one of the things that has been missing for the past two years, but that will hopefully be coming back soon. Nonetheless, she said, parents need to stay involved with their students and the school however possible.

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Another way to stay involved, Mrs. Coro said, is just to make sure the student reads each night.

“I have a program that I ask my students to read 20 minutes every night. And they have to tell me the next morning, what they’ve read and a little bit about it,” she said, adding that “100% of them read last night! That’s when I know I’ve done some good. That I’ve got them to be readers.”