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Decades of Memories

Everett kindergarten teacher Judie Seibel will cherish the years she spent forming young minds

By Melissa Slager
Herald Writer

EVERETT - Kindergarten teacher Judie Seibel will leave more than her classroom of 22 years at Garfield Elementary School when she retires this month.

"It's like home to me. It's like a family," said Seibel, holding back tears as she crouched in a child-size chair at a table with crayon marks.

Seibel has had seen generations of Everett families in her classrooms, where kids learn as well as play.

"I moved a lot as a child. It's nice to stay in one place this long. To know these families. See the kids go on to high school and have these big, 6-foot guys come back and say, 'Do you know me?' I like that constancy."

Seibel has taught for 40 years, and has taught kindergarten for 29 of those years.

She's seen many changes, including a move to full-day kindergarten and increasing emphasis on reading and math lessons that used to be the academic fare of first-graders.

One thing that hasn't changed is her bright smile, evident in classroom photos that line her wall, and an effort to make her classroom "a safe and happy place."

Class time includes plenty of singing and music, as well as arts, crafts, counting games and the like.

"There's still a necessity to keep a balance - the creative side of messing around with paints and Play-Doh - those kinds of experiences they still need. I can't imagine a kindergarten classroom without blocks."

Her classroom is home to a large upright piano. "Ages ago I think it used to be a requirement to play piano," Seibel said. "I'm no great shakes, but (the kids) think it's magic."

The 22 young children in her classroom this year use words like "pretty" and "nice" to describe their teacher - high praise in kindergarten vocabulary.

"She reads us a story. She lets us color. She lets us go to the big recess," said Blanca Camacho-Zotelo, 5.

"She lets us do a whole bunch of stuff - fun stuff and learning stuff," said Lester Howard, 6.

"My favorite part about kindergarten is we get to learn," said Maddison Rainey, 6.

At age 62, Seibel said it's simply time to retire.

"I don't have the energy anymore ... to do the kind of teaching these kids should have. I remember what it was like when I was younger. It's physically too hard for me."

Seibel said she'll most miss being around 5- and 6-year-olds.

"They're sort of incredible people," she said. "If I tell people I'm a kindergarten teacher, people say, 'That must be so fun. They're so cute.' But there's a lot going on in their minds. You can have an interesting conversation with a 5- or 6-year-old."

Seibel's ears perked at the sound of the school bell, signaling the start of another school day. Her kids would be arriving soon, so she needed to greet them.

"There's a feel in a kindergarten classroom when everyone is happy," she said. "I hope I feel that in heaven."

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