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Retirees and others honored for service



(from left) Frank Velez, Camille Thompson, Sally Holton and Elaine Breeding enjoy the first moments of their new rocking chairs. The retirees were honored during a celebration in the Williston Middle High School Media Center on Thursday (May 30).

Story and photos

By Jeff M. Hardison © June 1, 2019 at 9:19 p.m.

WILLISTON -- Four people retiring from the Levy County School District and three active teachers at Williston Middle High School were honored Thursday afternoon (May 30) at a ceremony in the WMHS media center.



This cake was enjoyed by people after the ceremony.

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Empty rockers await retirees before the program starts



Levy County Assistant Superintendent of Schools John Lott and WMHS Assistant Principal Hillary Cribbs pause for a moment before the ceremony begins. Both of these local educational leaders played significant parts in the program.

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Some of the people watching the celebration are seen here.

Levy County Assistant Superintendent of Schools John Lott served as the master of ceremonies. Superintendent of Schools Jeff Edison arrived shortly after the event started due to his presence being required at Joyce Bullock Elementary School that afternoon for a similar event.

Each person retiring received a rocking chair with their names and years of service attached to the rocking chairs. They also went home with a gift bag from the School District and other presents from family and friends.

Combined, these retiring workers spent 105 years helping in the education of students in Levy County, according to the dates on the plaques of their rocking chairs, however one of the recipients was teaching in Levy County via the UF/IFAS Levy County Cooperative Extension Service even before her decades at Williston High School and then Williston Middle High School.

The four retirees are Camille Thompson (1984-2019) 35 years; Elaine Breeding (1985-2019) 34 years; Sally Holton (1996-2019) 23 years; and Frank Velez (2006-2019) 13 years.



Camille Thompson listens as Assistant Superintendent of Schools John Lott speaks about her decades of service to students and others in Williston.

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Thompson actually started working with the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences when she was 20 years old, and she is 60 years old now.

“I’ve been here a long time,” Thompson said. “I went to school here. My children have gone to school here. And we have a long legacy of being supporters of Williston, and we will continue to do that.”

Thompson went on to say that when people ask her what she will do, she responds “What do you think I’m going to do? I’m going to do FFA, and do things that are going to support the community and support the school.”

She said she plans to go out to her farm and wait for calls from people who want her to help.

Frank Velez (left) is honored by Assistant Superintendent of Schools John Lott during the ceremony on Thursday.

Next Velez was recognized as a retiree, effective with the end of this school year.

Velez, a retired United States Army sergeant, served as the instructor for Williston High School’s unit of the United States Army Jr. Reserve Officer Training Corps.

Assistant Superintendent Schools Lott said that during his time as the WHS principal, he valued the JROTC program. Lott mentioned that he appreciates back when Velez taught reading as well as being the JROTC instructor, and that he is thankful for everything Velez has done for the school and the students.

“To everyone who supports us,” Velez said after Lott’s presentation, “Thank you. We love you.”



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Sally Horton listens as Assistant Superintendent of Schools John Lott speak about her helping students at WMHS.

Holton was among the English and reading teachers, Lott said, who really had to pitch in when the Florida Department of Education evaluated WHS as an “F” school.

“They took a lot of the brunt of the DOE mandates and everything they (DOE) made us do,” Lott said of the English teachers back then. “Every day was stressful. I mean, we had ambulances being called for staff sometimes every other day, it seems like. That’s how stressful it was.

“And Sally was one of our stalwarts,” Lott continued, “and really helped out, to get us out of that hole; from an “F” to an “A” in just a few years. So, I appreciate everything you’ve done for the school, for the kids and for me. Thank you!”

Holton said she remembers telling Lott that she could document another 20 hours a week that was required of her by the DOE, in addition to the normal before and after school hours of making lesson plans, grading essays and performing other work that few people other than close family members ever see.

Unlike Thompson’s plan to be on the farm, Holton said her retirement plans include adventures by traveling. She does plan to be around, nonetheless, and to volunteer, she added.

“I have to say I love my career,” Holton said. “For 32 years, I’ve had the pleasure of teaching in my mission field. I’ve loved every minute of it.”

She added that her husband Ed, now will need to retire from serving as a substitute teacher. Her children have attended WHS, as has her daughter-in-law, and she anticipates her grandchildren will graduate from WHS.

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Elaine Breeding hears Assistant Superintendent of Schools John Lott tell everyone about the vital job a bookkeeper plays at a school, and how a principal must depend on this key member of the support staff.

A professor of Lott's -- when Lott was taking a course in school finance -- told him that the quickest way to get fired as a principal is to have an issue in accounting for money received and money spent.

That professor told Lott one of the most important things a principal does is to hire good people. Of all those people the principal hires, the one who is the most important to hire and the one that can get a principal fired the most quickly is the bookkeeper, he said.



Assistant Superintendent of Schools John Lott (left) listens as WMHS Principal Josh Slemp speaks during the ceremony.

Lott said he passed this pearl of wisdom on to WMHS Principal Josh Slemp and to other principals he has mentored.

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“We were very blessed,” Lott said, “and we have been blessed for many, many years, to have Miss Elaine here as bookkeeper -- and more than that. She did so much more than that in our school. We appreciate her as a district, as a school, and me personally.”

Breeding said she will be available if needed.

“If you need me, give me a call,” she said. “I’ll probably be by the pool. I love every one of y’all.”

After Principal Slemph invited people to share some of their thoughts about the retiring people, several individuals spoke.

Ed Holton said many people are unaware of how much time and effort teachers, support staff and administrators put into striving to assure the success of students and the school.

The absence of one of the four was noticed already.

Principal Slemph said he already was missing the guidance of Sgt. Velez as Slemph began a speech at the graduation before the color guard had presented the colors.

WMHS Assistant Principal Hillary Cribbs shared her perspective about the four retiring professionals.

Cribbs said she first came to know Sgt. Velez when she was working at Williston Elementary School with his wife Yvette Velez.

“He looked like an awesome support system every time I saw him,” Assistant Principal Cribbs said. “I heard nothing but great things from her (about him), and I’ve enjoyed getting to work alongside you (Sgt. Velez) this year.”

Cribbs said she wishes all happiness for the retiring JROTC instructor, and that she is praying for him.

Thompson was the very first teacher that Cribbs had in Williston, the assistant principal said, as Cribbs moved as a sixth grader in Chiefland going into seventh grade at Williston Middle School. Thompson was her first period teacher.

Cribbs intimated that thanks to Thompson’s teaching, she remembers most of the 50 states without having to look at a map or other reference media.

Having Thompson as her first teacher in seventh grade had a positive impact on Cribbs, she said. Had it been a less friendly or positive teacher, the impact could have gone another way.

“It has been a great honor to work beside you this year,” Cribbs said to Thompson (whom she still has difficulty using her first name).

Horton taught Cribbs when the woman who is now an assistant principal was in the 10th grade at WHS.

“She (Horton) was one of my very favorite teachers in high school,” Cribbs said.

Horton’s hugs helped Cribbs, she said.

“Some people think middle schoolers and high schoolers don’t need hugs,” Cribbs said. “They do.”

The assistant principal shared that she gave the outgoing bookkeeper her share of work.

Cribbs may have tested Breeding this year, she said.

“If I turn in one more receipt to her (Breeding),” Cribbs said, “she’s probably going to have my head. But Miss Elaine was there when I was in high school...”

Cribbs went on to say that it has been amazing for her to work alongside people, such as these very four individuals who are retiring, who are why she chose to enter education as a profession.

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Emily King then spoke about her sister Camille (King) Thompson. Some call the two both now-retired women “the Williston sisters.”

King said her sister is her “BFF” (best friend forever). Thompson listened to her sister during their lives, and when there was a need, Thompson comforted King by telling her “It’s going to be O.K.”

“In her creative way,” King said of her sister, “she comes up with a solution to a problem. It might not be what you want to hear, especially the older sister, but more than likely it is very sound advice.

“We were supposed to retire together three years ago,” King said. “And she, as many people I have told – she bailed on me.”

King was teaching in Marion County at the time she retired three years ago.

King said, therefore, WHS and WMHS have enjoyed three extra years with her sister beyond when one plan regarding their retirement was made but was a dream deferred.

King noted that while she must admit her bias in regard to her sister, it is still her contention that “A legend is going to walk out this door today” when Thompson retires.

Thompson is noted by her sister to be “... an advocate not just for her own child, but for every child, for every person, for Ag programs, for whatever she thinks is right and sound. And I love you Camille!”

Dedee McLeod spoke about her perspective.

Sgt. Velez and she “go back a ways,” McLeod said.

They have worked together, and she considers him a good friend and appreciates his help over the years.

McLeod shared that, like Thompson’s sister, she loves Camille as well.

If not for the extra effort by Horton, McLeod said she questions whether her son could have graduated high school, and she is grateful for Horton’s success as a teacher.

“What an instrumental part of his high school career you were. I appreciate that,” McLeod said to Horton.

Breeding was noted for her work beyond bookkeeping, which McLeod said, is keeping the kitchen clean.

Principal Slempp said that with the retirement of all of these professionals, a huge gap will need to be filled.

Superintendent of Schools Edison said one of the things some people may not understand is the dedication of the teachers, support staff and administrators to the students, fellow staff members and to the community as a whole.

The spirit of educators and others involved in this school system, Edison said, is the

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spirit of living a life to serve others. As for filling the vacuum created by this exodus of such talented souls, Edison said the district will just continue to go forward, because there are a lot of good people in Levy County. As for the members of the Levy County School District, Edison said he expects everyone to continue to be the servants that they are.

Assistant Superintendent of Schools Lott also presented three Impact Awards to teachers on Thursday afternoon.

Recipients are nominated by colleagues at the school, Lott said, and these awards are for going beyond the call of duty.

Donna Bennett prepares to receive her Impact Award.

Donna Bennett was the first person presented with the Impact Award at WMHS. Lott said she earned this recognition by the degree she goes to help the WMHS students every day.



Assistant Superintendent John Lott (left) presents Ben Hawkins with the Impact Award.

Ben Hawkins was the second Impact Award recipient. Like Bennett, Hawkins earned the award as a result of going beyond the call of duty. Assistant Superintendent Lott noted Hawkins "... not only gets the job done, but also shows the kids that he cares about them."

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Assistant Superintendent John Lott (left) presents Natalie Couey with the Impact Award.

Natalie Couey was the third recipient of an Impact Award at WMHS during this celebration at the conclusion of the school year. The creation of her engaging lessons, Lott said, is something that allows the students to progress as they do.

Four friends pause for a group photo during the part of the celebration

where people began enjoying the cake. They are (from left) Assistant Superintendent John Lott, JROTC Instructor Frank Velez, Levy County Superintendent of Schools Jeff Edison and WMHS Principal Josh Slemp.

