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## Just as important: Inside the classroom

BY HEATHER GRAVES STAFF WRITER

BROWN COUNTY - Parents advocate and directors facilitate.

But, it's teachers who interpret complex 504 accommodation plans and Individualized Education Plans - to turn them into meaningful lessons for students.

Area administrators agree the success of any special education department is heavily dependent on the teachers inside the classrooms.

### A life-long passion

For more than three decades, Stacy Splittgerber has helped Green Bay's youngest special education students.

Splittgerber, an early childhood special education teacher at Kennedy Elementary School, said the job is filled with ups and downs, twists and turns, and experiences out of left field - with no two days the same.



Jennifer Woldt, a special education teacher at Lineville Intermediate School, started her career in special education, moved to general education following burnout, but returned to special education to be the teacher she needed in fifth grade. She keeps a picture of herself in her desk as a reminder.

Juggling a classroom of students aged 3-6 with varying needs, Splittgerber is of-

ten uncertain of what each day will bring, but she said the smallest successes keep

her motivated.

"I can have a really bad couple months, and I can go

home and be like, 'I'm out, this is my last year,'" she said. "And then there will



be a day after that and there is a huge breakthrough with one of the students... It's in those moments when I know I've made a difference. That I know that I need to keep coming back, because they need me."

Splittgerber said some days are tougher than others.

"When they are swearing at me, which believe me, even at 3, I've had quite a few words," Splittgerber said. "But, I know they don't mean it."

She said there have been days where it's crossed her mind to walk away.

"I had a little boy - he would just scream at everything," she said. "So, an hour-and-a-half of my

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## Literacy Green Bay helps woman, others realize citizenship dreams

BY HEATHER GRAVES STAFF WRITER

GREEN BAY - In Ukrainian, "povynno buty" means meant to be.

Regardless of the language, 57-year-old Ukrainian immigrant Olga Wakker said it's a phrase she uses often to describe her path

to the United States.

Born and raised in Odessa, Ukraine, a port city on the Black Sea, Wakker said she never imagined moving to America, let alone becoming a citizen and making a life on a dairy farm in Northeast Wisconsin.

It started with a chance

meeting with a man from Holland at a folk dance ensemble concert in 2010 in Odessa.

Two years later the pair married and embarked on a new adventure in the U.S.

Her husband, Johannes, was familiar with life in the states, having worked as a plant engineer in Wisconsin for many years.

sin for many years.

However, when the couple made the move, they bought a dairy farm in Kewaunee and began making traditional Dutch cheese, which they sell throughout the country, including at many stores in Greater Green Bay.

"I didn't choose Kewaunee, Kewaunee chose me," she said. "Kewaunee was predisposed by fate for me, because my husband, Johannes, lived and worked here for more than 30 years."

When she got to the U.S., she said she found several Ukrainian- and Russian-speaking friends in the area, which helped make Wisconsin feel like home.

"They helped me to find a

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Ukrainian immigrant Olga Wakker, 57, recently became a U.S. citizen with the help of her tutor through Literacy Green Bay. Submitted Photo



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**CLASSROOM**  
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three-hour morning is him screaming continuously. And I would go home those nights and say 'I can't do this.' And then the next day I go in and he runs off the bus and says 'Stacy, Stacy, I missed you. I love you.' And so that is the day that I know I have to keep going. There is always a positive for a negative."

Spittgerber said she leans heavily on her colleagues for support.

"Because my husband doesn't understand my job, I can't go home and vent to him," she said. "So that's where a colleague and I will get onto messenger or call and be like 'What can I do? I need some help.' I have an (aide) in the room with me. So she and I can bounce ideas off each other. And when I am having a really bad day, she knows what to say, and the same for her. We know the bad days aren't going to last. There is always a rainbow at the end."

Spittgerber said even though she's been at this for 30 years, there is always more to learn.

"I'm not afraid to ask for help," she said. "Everybody needs help. The support I get from my school and administration is a huge help. Whenever I am having a really rough day, they are always there to pick me up."

**Focus on the positive**

At the end of every day, Heather Potts – a fifth-grade math and science teacher at Lineville Intermediate School – takes a moment to scan each desk in her classroom, making note of the successes the students in those seats had that day.

"I literally look at each seat and just kind of think about what went well with each student that day," Potts said. "If I had a really bad interaction – or felt like that challenge didn't go the way I wanted it to, or it was just a stressful day or that lesson was just a bomb – there are always more positives than negatives."

Though she is a general education teacher, Potts said aspects of the special education program have always been a part of her classrooms – whether it's a student with a 504 plan needing accommodations or another needing a spe-



Heather Potts, a fifth-grade math and science teacher at Lineville Intermediate School, replays her students' success everyday after the final bell rings. **Heather Graves Photo**

cial education teacher to join her classroom to provide that student or students with help.

Potts said decompressing after the school day hasn't always been easy.

"It's been a journey for me, honesty," she said. "I'm a very empathetic person. With all of the challenges my students face, and every situation and every student is different, I pick up on that stuff. But I've learned to set boundaries for myself on my time, just my emotional state. I've done counseling. I've done a lot of just prioritizing self-care and that kind of stuff. Really it's just knowing when I've reached that limit and need to step away."

Potts said her students are part of her heart.

"I saw a meme that talked about how 'Once you've been one of my students, you'll always be one of my kids' – and that is accurate, very accurate," she said.

Potts said she has never met a teacher who didn't want their students to succeed.

"Every teacher is different, and depending on their experiences and the support they get, it's going to affect how they go about that," Potts said. "I would say that we want to work with parents, and we want to provide opportunities for students to be successful."

On tough days, Potts said she leans on those around her.

"We have extremely supportive administrators," she said. "So, on the really rough days, I'll often go and

just chat with them. They are really good at hearing me out and framing things in a positive way."

Her message to parents and community members is never stop advocating.

"If you are concerned about your child, don't stop advocating for them, and work with the teacher and the district and fight for that child to get what they need. Because at the end of the day, that is what we all want. And I think that is universal at the heart of being a teacher."

**Always an advocate**

Inside the desk drawer of Lineville special education teacher Jenny Woldt sits a picture of herself from fifth grade.

Woldt said behind the smile and 1990s perm is a girl struggling, in desperate need of guidance.

She said she holds onto the picture to remind herself to be the advocate to her students she needed years ago.

"I really love servicing students that maybe there are times people will say the odds are against," she said. "That is where my

passion lies."

Woldt started her teaching career in the Green Bay School District as a special education teacher at the high school level.

After a few years, Woldt said she felt the pressure being a special education teacher brings.

"I felt my power of influence was too late for some," she said. "So how can I work with scholars to change the mindset that your path isn't predetermined and education is your gateway to achieve whatever your heart sets?"

Woldt said that led to a shift in focus and a position at Jefferson Elementary School as a fourth-fifth multi-grade general education teacher.

"And I stayed there for 12 years," she said. "I served students of all abilities and I loved my role. But at the end of my, probably to be honest 10th year, I really realized I love the social and emotional component of my job... And that is where I found my power of influence with kiddos."

A position opened up at Lineville – one Woldt said was too good to pass – and

she made the transition back into a special education teaching role.

"My job all day is to help with the well-being, the social and emotional care of students with significant disabilities," she said. "I love this job. I love this position, and what I do here at Lineville as a special education teacher."

Woldt starts each of her days with breakfast in her classroom with her students.

"We have this really cool community of gathering time, like a dinner table, if you will," she said. "And it is a great time for us to check in with each other to see how our evenings went – with sleep, with family, with our temperament, just that checkpoint. And so, from there we run social skills lessons with each other – really, just how do we take care of ourselves in a healthy way? And how can we be kind and flourish in our school day? So, conversations or activities or games (go) around that."

Woldt said she strives to do whatever is needed to help her students.

"So throughout the day, if we look at my schedule, it is supporting academics, but the root of it all is supporting stability emotional-

wise," she said. "Making sure everyone feels safe, that they belong, because when you feel safe and that you belong and you feel cared for, you can do a lot with academics."

As the lead case manager of the IEP team for her group of students, she serves as the connection between the home, school and the community.

"Scholars I work with may have community teams through the county or the state – so (they're) always bringing us all together..." she said, "and making sure we are doing the best we can for the scholar we are servicing."

Woldt said she makes sure families know she is always available.

"I provide my cellphone number – within limits," she said. "I will say 'You can reach me between these hours.' But I make sure they are night hours because I know, myself, it would be hard to connect with my child's teachers during the school day only... So I make sure I'm available in the evening as well as earlier in the morning."

Woldt said she is an advocate for her students "for life."

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"I continually tell families, I don't go away just because they moved to a different school," she said. "I will forever be an advocate and an ally for your family and your child. And I hope the families that I service feel that and know that I am dependable, because I just want to do right by the child."

Woldt said she has come to realize, regardless of her efforts, there are some things she can't fix.

"That circle of control is what I go back to," she said. "I can control providing, when students are with me, a stable, calm, safe environment with high expectations, but with high love. I can control that."

**Collaborative approach**

Sara Doverspike has helped students at De Pere Middle School for the past 14 years.

"I was very surprised that middle school level was really what hit me as the level that I would be interested in and would kind of be with what I would stick with throughout my career," Doverspike said.

Throughout those years, she said special education students have always been a part of her general education classrooms.

This year is slightly different as she has taken on a collaborative teaching role.

"Team teaching will be a new collaboration for me this year," Doverspike said. "I am foreseeing a lot more opportunity to plan with the specifics of student IEPs in mind this year. Of course, we always have to be following students' needs through their IEPs, whether we have a supported class or not, whether it's collaborative or team teaching aides or just students in the class-

room. But, I think (it's important) being able to more specifically see what the student needs are and guide those step-by-step this year."

Meeting students where they are, especially in middle school, is key for Doverspike.

"Middle school level, just the social aspect of where students are at and helping them work through connecting with each other socially/emotionally where kids are coming from (is key)," she said.

Doverspike said De Pere has been fortunate with a fairly consistent group of special education support staff.

"So, students get to know them, and they are not just someone who would be with them in math," she said. "They would see them in other places around the building."

Doverspike said as she's gained experience, she's learned establishing routines is crucial.

"I finish up and have (things) ready for the next day, so that when I walk into the room the next day, there are things about the physical space that are ready for me," she said.

However, she said stepping away is easier said than done.

"We know on any given day, a student can walk in with things that happened outside of school that are going to impact their day," she said. "Same for us, and knowing that, we need grace, they need grace. It is important to let them know that it is okay to have a bad day, and we'll figure it out. That is, I would say, is one of the most taxing parts of the education profession - being able to find your own time and separate."

**Destined to advocate**

Haley Grzywa's advocating for students with disabilities extends beyond the classroom.

"My passion to work with kids with disabilities started with my older brother who has Down syndrome," Grzywa said. "I hope to inspire others the way he has inspired me."

For the past three years, she has helped guide third-through fifth-grade special education learners at Pioneer Elementary School in Ashwaubenon.

Grzywa said the majority of her day is spent doing what she calls "my favorite part of the job" - working with kids.

"I also spend a lot of time collaborating with teachers, lesson planning, communicating with families and completing required paperwork," she said.

She said a common challenge among teachers in all specialties is time.

"Teaching requires daily collaboration to ensure we are giving our best to the kids and making sure that

we are reaching all learners," she said.

Grzywa said it's a tall order for someone juggling the varying needs - learning disabilities, emotional/behavioral disabilities and other health impairments - of 15 students on a daily basis.

She said the responsibility can weigh on her.

"I take a lot of the job home, especially when I have students struggling," she said.

Grzywa said the progress she sees daily in her students pushes her to continue supporting her young learners.

When times get tough, she said she has amazing coworkers she can rely on. "We help each other through the challenging moments," she said.

Like many teachers, she stresses the importance of work/home balance.

"It is easy to get caught up in the work and spend all of your nights and weekends (focused) on school," she said. "But, it's essential to remember that everyone has things going on outside of school."

**Dual advocacy**

Seymour special education teacher Jodi Barrington also advocates for students with disabilities.

With 19 years of special education teaching experience and having her three children diagnosed with ADHD, and one autistic, Barrington said she sees both sides.

Barrington said her desire to become a special education teacher stems from her struggles with similar experiences when she was in school.

"Because my teachers and parents believed in me and helped me believe in myself, I decided to become a special education teacher, because I want students to know they can do whatever they put their mind to," she said. "They can accomplish any goal they set for themselves."

**Next week: Funding conundrum**

Next week's issue will feature the sixth and final installment in this series on special education.

The story looks at what both sides of the political aisle want to see done about special education.

As a special education teacher at Seymour Middle School, Barrington said she knows the importance of taking time to recharge.

"I take the time to recharge by doing the things I really enjoy," she said.

She said doing the best she can for students throughout the day allows her the opportunity to step away and decompress at night.

"I am still thinking about students and families when I go home, even through the summer," she said. "It's hard to just switch it off, because you care about your students and families. But the connections that I make with my students and their families, I know I am doing the best job I can do."

Barrington's days are filled with interventions to address specific needs, but she said she is adamant about reaching out to parents with positives as well.

"(I) let them know the achievements we are seeing, too," she said.

The University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, 4th Estate Media, made a searchable special education database that goes along with this series. It can be found in the online story at [gopresstimes.com](http://gopresstimes.com).

This story was produced by the NEW News Lab, a collaboration of newsrooms that focuses on issues important to Northeast Wisconsin.

**THEME: SCARY MOVIES**

**ACROSS**

- 1. Shenanigan
- 6. "Losing My Religion" band
- 9. Kind of learning
- 13. Capital of Egypt
- 14. Nest egg acronym
- 15. Cupid's target
- 16. Bar, legally
- 17. Indian restaurant staple
- 18. Kind of committee, two words
- 19. \*Hedge maze, dull boy, redrum, with The
- 21. \*Pretend girlfriend, surgery, body parts
- 23. Monkey \_\_\_\_\_, monkey do
- 24. Post-it message
- 25. It makes a guitar louder
- 28. Royal Indian
- 30. Perfumes
- 35. Glorify
- 37. Freeway exit
- 39. Like today's cell phones?
- 40. Keen on
- 41. Like a confection
- 43. At any time
- 44. One of the large keys on the right
- 46. Greek portico
- 47. Common workday start
- 48. Former President of Egypt
- 50. Ancient eternal life symbol
- 52. \*Bathtub, hacksaws, Jigsaw
- 53. Euphemism for "damn"
- 55. \*Blind violinist, transplant surgery, sees ghosts, with The
- 57. \*Hotel, mother, shower
- 60. \*Count, bite, cross
- 64. Hot winter drink
- 65. Aye's opposite
- 67. Financial benefactor
- 68. Seize a throne
- 69. Headquartered in Langley
- 70. Exclude or omit
- 71. Done on a Smith Corona
- 72. Old age, archaic
- 73. 6666...

**DOWN**

- 1. Single pip cards
- 2. Crosby, Stills, \_\_\_\_\_ & Young
- 3. South American monkey
- 4. Actor Jeremy
- 5. Xerox machine
- 6. \*Videotape, stone well, seven days, with The
- 7. Paleozoic one
- 8. Tropical smoothie flavor

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- 9. Make over
- 10. Hawaiian island
- 11. Ragtime turkey dance
- 12. And so on, abbr.
- 15. Bias crime perpetrators
- 20. Closes in on
- 22. Pilot's announcement, acr.
- 24. ID badge, two words
- 25. \*Sigourney Weaver, outer space
- 26. Old Testament miracle food
- 27. Hits while on the green
- 29. \*Beachgoers, police chief, need for bigger boat
- 31. \*Boy, shadows in photographs, three sixes, with The
- 32. "Transylvania" daughter
- 33. Entertainment complex
- 34. Scatter
- 36. "Nobody \_\_\_\_\_ It Better"
- 38. Low-ranking worker
- 42. One who accepts the offer
- 45. Porter's head gear
- 49. U Rah \_\_\_\_\_!
- 51. Seven daughters of Atlas
- 54. Present
- 56. Food-borne bacteria
- 57. One in a pocketful, according to Mother Goose
- 58. Fish a.k.a. porgy
- 59. Bygone era
- 60. Two of a kind
- 61. Type of operating system
- 62. Prospector's mother?
- 63. God of war, son of Zeus
- 64. Director's cry
- 66. Be ill

S	E	X	I	S		D	L	E		E	P	L	A	T
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V	O	N	O	D		L	A	N		V	A	C	O	C
R	L	O	D	A		D	O	H		C	A	S	P	
		E	L	E		G	N	A		D	A	N		
M	A	S	H	K		N	A	V		R	E	S	S	V
E	N	I	N		V	O	T	S		R	E	T	N	E
R	E	L	E		T	E	E	M		S	O	L	N	I
T	R	A	M	S		P	A	R		D	U	V	L	
S	V	A	M	O		R	A	V		J	A	R	A	V
		E	T	O		N		E		E	S			
		T	U	O		E		G		G	N	I	N	I
		C	O	H		D	A			N	A	V		
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**POLLING**  
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system at Fire Station No. 2, with funds from the building maintenance fund.

Fire Chief Joel Bertler said Fire Station No. 2, at 2323 Northwood Road, is approaching 30 years old, and there have been no major

renovations to the heating, ventilation and air conditioning system since air conditioning was added in the early 2000s.

Bertler said the boiler used to heat the building is reaching its life expectancy, which typically is between 20-30 years.

He said Robinson Heating

and Cooling's work also includes replacing the water heater, and with the project expected to leave the building without heat for several days, staff recommended completion before the heating season approaches.

Bertler said the new boiler should last the village another 25-30 years.

**De Pere Historical Society to hold annual dinner**

DE PERE - The De Pere Historical Society will hold its annual dinner Wednesday, Oct. 20, at the Swan Club, 875 Heritage Rd.

There will be a cash bar starting at 5:30 p.m. with dinner at 6:30 p.m.

The guest speaker will

be Cliff Christl, Green Bay Packers historian and author.

The De Pere Woman's Club is making a presentation to the De Pere Historical Society of an item of significance to De Pere.

The Nan Workman award will be presented to

the volunteer of the year.

There are also awards for home and business renovations/restorations.

Reservations can be made by contacting White Pillars/De Pere Historical Society 403 N. Broadway, calling 920-336-3877 or online at [Deperehistory.org](http://Deperehistory.org)

**Holiday lights display coming to Voyageur Park**

DE PERE - The De Pere Parks, Recreation, and Forestry Department announced the creation of the Voyageur Park Holiday Lights Display.

With cooperation from Fox Communities Credit

Union, the city will create a unique drive-thru experience in Voyageur Park to view and enjoy holiday lights and decorations.

The display will operate from 5-9 p.m. Dec. 10-11, 17-18, and 23-26.

For this inaugural 2021 season, organizers anticipate the experience will have enough lights for approximately 20-25 trees, averaging 500-750 lights per tree, along with ground displays.