



NMAA Spotlight

Harrison Guides Tiger's Drama Team for over Two Decades

By Lauren Roussel, NMAA

When Sidley Harrison walks into Aztec High School's cafeteria, an area that serves as the school's theater room, she is filled with joy and a sense of accomplishment. Mrs. Harrison, who started at Aztec High School 24 years ago, has built the theater program from the ground up.

With an initial budget of \$25, she accepted the challenge to prove the importance of implementing a theater program at AHS. "When I first got to Aztec, they didn't have a theater program. So I pushed and pushed. They told me that no one was going to do theater because we were a sports town, but I told them to let me try. Dial Oil donated these big pieces of cardboard and the kids made their own costumes and that is how we started."

Mrs. Harrison graduated from New Mexico State University, where she majored in Performing Arts. After graduation she moved to Los Angeles and managed restaurants. Her career in education began as an English teacher at Animas High School. She was also able to devote time to coaching girls' basketball and volleyball. During her time at Animas, Harrison was able to bestow her love for the arts to her students involved in theater.

In 1992, Mrs. Harrison held Aztec High School's first theater production with just 20 students. The program has since grown to about 75 students. "It's the only activity wherein the coach isn't allowed to participate in the actual competition," Harrison stated. "I think it leads to great leadership because the kids have to make their own decisions instead of relying on us," she added.

Recently, Mrs. Harrison and the Aztec High School drama team travelled to Las Cruces for the 2014 One-Act-Play competition. Aztec finished third overall in the Athens Division.

One-Act-Play's goal is to nurture the appreciation of theater arts by encouraging its participants to take on roles of actors, designers, stagehands, and audience members. This year, One-Act-Play was held Oct. 23-25, concurrently with the High Desert Theater Festival hosted by the NMSU Theatre Arts Department.

Mrs. Harrison commented on why she enjoys the One-Act-Play competition, "I love that it's the person controlling the lighting, the one who puts makeup on you, the person who picks up your shoes. Everyone's score counts. When the kids walk off the stage, proud after having crazy nerves, those are the best moments to take away." Mrs. Harrison added, "I had a kid come back and tell me he had been through a hard time, but during this period of time he remembered everything I taught him and he was able to handle it without being scared."



Mrs. Harrison continued, "One aspect I love most about this job is seeing how encouraging the students are to one another. A 'competitor' will do a fantastic job and the students will congratulate them on their phenomenal performance."

Prizm Cohoe, a senior at Aztec High School, has been involved in the theater program for four years. "It's been a journey for me. I went from being super shy to being one of the loudest people I know," she confessed. Her favorite festival to go to is the One-Act-Play because, "it's a great program and it's a festival built for people who are interested in theater; therefore, not stressful."

One of Mrs. Harrison's intentions with the theater program is to give the students confidence and build leadership amongst one another.

"I had no confidence, now I can get up and speak and I feel proud of myself," said Bailey Chavez, a second year theater student. "It's made me responsible and it's helped me build character."

When asked what she enjoyed most about Mrs. Harrison, Prizm replied, "She is the most brilliant person I've ever met. She is so persistent. She is so particular about every little thing. To see the look on her face when we perform, that is my favorite."

William Bradford, theater ambassador, has helped build the camaraderie among participants by organizing game nights and get-togethers for everyone to socialize and get to know each other. "It's so amazing to see all of these people who are interested in theater," Bradford said. About Mrs. Harrison, Bradford stated, "She knows what she's doing. She's helped us do amazing things this year, she is willing to help in any way we need."

Harrison is constantly pushing her students to keep going, especially when they want to give up. Many students look up to Mrs. Harrison as a role model; some even refer to her as their "second mother." Harrison hopes to continue sharing her passion for the arts with her students for many years to come.

