

Mountain Pointe teacher honored as Presidential Award finalist

By Megan Lupo

TEMPE, Ariz. — A Mountain Pointe High School educator was recognized for being one of three Arizona contenders considered for the Presidential Awards for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching (PAEMST) by the Tempe Union High School District (TUHSD) Governing Board at the Oct. 16 meeting.

The five board members presented engineering teacher Melissa Wendell with a plaque, commemorating her achievement as a 2019 Arizona State Finalist for Excellence in Secondary Mathematics Teaching and praised her continuation to the national level.

According to the PAEMST website, the Awards are the most prestigious recognition given to K-12 science, technology, engineering, mathematics and computer science teachers by the U.S. government.

“I was super excited and surprised all at the time because it’s such a big award, and there are a lot of teachers that are applying for it.” Wendell said about her reaction to her nomination. “To be selected is a huge honor.”

There have been 91 Arizona recipients since Congress established the Awards in 1983, according to the PAEMST website.

If Wendell becomes a recipient of the PAEMST, she would be the second teacher from Mountain Pointe High School to win since the late John Lassen Jr., a math teacher, did in 1989, according to the PAEMST website. She would, also, be awarded \$10,000 from the National Science Foundation, a paid trip to Washington, D.C. to be recognized and a certificate signed by the U.S. president.

Wendell said the application process she had to go through to get to where she is now was an immense task. There was a detailed writing portion about her instructional methods, student assessments and classroom leadership, as well as a video component, where she had to record a classroom lesson.

The lesson she said she chose was on robotics, a topic she had helped foster within the TUHSD since she started teaching in 2003, and ended with showing the class how to calculate torque, or the moment of force that causes rotation.

Now, Wendell has another arduous challenge— waiting two years for the 2019 awardees to be announced.

Wendell said the long wait was attributed to the decrease of funding to support the Awards at a national level and the lack of staff needed in the task of selecting teachers.

For TUHSD Director of Career and Technical Education Stephanie Frimer, who wrote Wendell's letter of recommendation for the application, she said it would be worth the delay, as she is confident Wendell will win.

Frimer said that Wendell deserves the award for her engagement and involvement with the students and her influence in shaping the other engineering teachers in the six other high schools in the TUHSD.

Superintendent Kevin Mendivil and the board honored Wendell Wednesday night by citing qualities that made her an excellent teacher— impactful, motivating and passionate.

The announcement of Wendell's accomplishments during the board meeting comes in the aftermath of a scandal, involving another Mountain Pointe High School teacher.

Former assistant football and girls' basketball coach Justin Hager was terminated in the beginning of October for disclosing game plans, strategies, player ineligibilities and other confidential information to opposing coaches for the past three years via email.

Although board member Brian Garcia cited Wendell's contributions to being part of the commitment toward students, he said that it was an unfortunate circumstance that the TUHSD had to dismiss Hager over that violation of trust, as Garcia's main priority is the students.

"I recognize that it's good that we have and highlight activities like [Wendell's]," Garcia said. "We, also, have to remain accountable and realize what other things are going on like, for example, former coach Hager."

Wendell said that there is a lot of advancement at Mountain Pointe High School, but, sometimes, the negatives, like in this instance, overshadow.

TUHSD Board President Berdetta Hodge said she wants to emphasize the positives and progression of Wendell, heading a traditionally man-driven profession of math and science.

"To see a woman actually lead [an engineering course] and do such a phenomenal job and actually be a finalist, it makes me proud and shows the future females of today that there is nothing that can stop them," Hodge said. "She shows that we, as women, don't have to go toward the English, the home economics, the cooking, like [society] used to push us in the past."

Wendell offered admiration back to the TUHSD, as she said the district provided opportunities for teachers like her to be creative and spearhead classroom lessons, allowing for her accolades.

In the meantime, she said she will patiently see what happens in the future.

“Hopefully in two years, I’ll get a nice surprise email, but just being a finalist is a great honor, regardless of whether I am the winner of the Awards,” Wendell said. “I think it’s just very special just to be recognized as a state finalist for such a prestigious award.”