

Teacher of the Year

Fullen named for her dedication to teaching music

By Jeff Smithpeters
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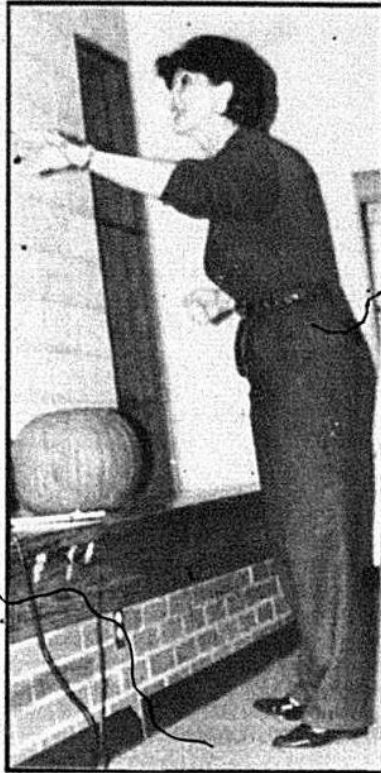
There is a lot of room in Gwen Fullen's classroom. There has to be. In one corner is an upright piano. In another, a collection of hanging plants. On shelves at the back of the room are enough musical instruments to furnish a creative outlet for the 30 children occupying the desks.

In Fullen's room, located to the right of the auditorium/cafeteria at Perritt Primary School, Arkadelphia's Teacher of the Year for 1996 plies her trade, teaching children from kindergarten to the third grade about music, how to appreciate it and how to make it, as they did Monday afternoon and evening.

That's when Fullen led many of her young students in a musical program that ran the gamut from the Village People to rap. She stood just in front of the stage, which had been decked out in orange and black for Halloween, conducting her first graders' performance of "The Hokey Pokey" with obvious dedication.

They sang "YMCA." They sang "Autumn," with first graders Callie Hamilton and Austin Barnes providing solos. They capped off their set with "Get Up," a rhythmic number that got the afternoon crowd of about 60 parents and about 270 students clapping their hands — except, of course, for those parents who held camcorders.

But despite all the pageantry and production, Fullen says this isn't her favorite part of teaching. Her favorite part, she said,



Kathy Cockerill / Siftings Herald

Gwen Fullen directs Perritt Primary students in a Halloween musical Monday afternoon.

is "when I can tell the light bulb's come on. Any time you can create a situation where you have caused a child to become aware of what you were doing and understand it, you just see the eyes go bright and they say, 'Okay, I get it.' That's just about the best thing there is."

Fullen has been a public school teacher since 1979; she taught private lessons for five years before that. She moved to Arkadelphia in 1984 and spent three years teaching at Peake Elementary before taking the job she has now, teaching music to grades K-3 at Perritt Primary School. Throughout her career, she says she has always believed one thing. "Across the spectrum of teaching music, whether it's private lessons or whether it's in the school system, you have to first get the children to love music."

For Fullen it doesn't matter how you get them to love music or what kind of music you get them to love. "I will do anything to get them to love music. It can be any kind of music. We will sing country and western. We will listen to rap. We will open the classroom to anything to find their interest. Once they can love something, then I think we can teach them to appreciate all of it with a little time and a little patience," she said.

And who knows? Maybe one of Fullen's 5-year-olds will be the next Beethoven or Gershwin or Neil Young. "It's very easy to spot those that are gifted," Fullen said. "There are also those who might be very hesitant or insecure in their abilities and with a little encouragement they might step forward and make that first attempt at doing something that puts them in the spotlight."

But now Fullen is in the spotlight. Last week she was named the Arkadelphia School District's Teacher of the Year. "I was very very warmed by that," Fullen said. "I've been here 12 years, and I've seen a lot of wonderful teachers and a lot of hard work and a lot of dedication and determination. To be placed in a position to represent that kind of a teacher was quite an honor, so I was very thrilled and pleased."

So were the members of the audience who heard those first grade singers.