

Muriel Summers inspires MCS on Convocation Day

Muriel Summers, an educator known worldwide for her influence on student leadership, began to tear up as she talked about her own fourth grade teacher.

She remembered Miss Rose fondly for taking time each day to express her love to students.

"I can't tell you too much about what she taught me," Summers said while speaking at Marion City Schools' Convocation Day on Tuesday. "But I can tell you how she made me feel. I spent my life trying to make her proud.



"Can one person make a difference? She did for us and you can for the children whom you serve."

Summers, principal of A.B. Combs Elementary School in Raleigh, N.C., worked with FranklinCovey to create the student leadership program named The Leader in Me. The program, based on motivational author Stephen Covey's "7 Habits of Highly Effective People," is now used at 2,717 schools worldwide including Marion City Schools' six elementary schools and middle school.

Her message to the district's staff was to get to know people's stories, both students' stories and circumstances and those of their colleagues, and to never stop sharing their own.

"Everyone has a story," she said. "Listen to it before you judge."

U.S. President Barack Obama. J.K. Rowling, author of the popular "Harry Potter" children's books. Movie director Steven Spielberg. Summers referred to the story behind each of these people, including Spielberg's struggle with dyslexia as a child and Rowling's poverty before her success as an author. She said to recognize the stories and circumstances of students but not let those circumstances define who the students are.

Other stories followed including that of a community's beloved Mr. Parker, a teacher in Greenwood, Ark., whose impact on students lasted long after they graduated because of the love he showed them. She said such great love can have a ripple effect on students just by teachers "showing up" and being present in students' lives.

She talked about Griffin Furlong, a homeless Jacksonville, Fla., teenager who became valedictorian of his high school class. Other references followed the same theme, people not letting their circumstances in life define whom they become.

“What is the message we should be giving to our students?” she asked. “A message of hope, love and promise.”

Summers told staff to share their own stories about how they had been lifted up by someone other than their families. She shared popular quotes like, “Be kind for everyone you meet is fighting a battle we know nothing about.”

“If you care enough to make a difference this community can be just fine,” she said.

Summers’ visit coincides with George Washington and Taft elementary schools joining other schools in implementing The Leader in Me, one of the districts’ four main pillars of reform. Marion City Schools Superintendent Gary Barber has praised The Leader in Me for inspiring students to be leaders and for preparing students with the soft skills that area employers say they need to see in employees.

Barber welcomed the staff back on Tuesday during Convocation Day, traditionally held the day before students’ first day of classes to greet staff and offer encouragement for the upcoming school year. He joined with Summers in encouraging staff, saying that “we all have the ability to make a difference.”