

## **Helping others a 'passion' for Jenn Zwemer, 2024 Distinguished Lakeshore Educator award winner from Whitehall**

**The Whitehall alumna is in her 10th year as an interventionist at Ealy Elementary.**

WHITEHALL – Jenn Zwemer’s original career plan was to become a physical therapist, then life happened.

Love happened.

A 1985 Whitehall High School alumna, Jenn Grenell met Doug Zwemer while both attended the University of Michigan. Here was Grenell’s dilemma: She was going to have to leave Ann Arbor to continue schooling in Flint.

She had a change of heart.

“Oh, I don’t want to leave. I just met Doug. What am I going to do?” Jenn Zwemer recalled thinking. “I guess I’ll apply to the School of Education.”

The rest is history. Zwemer has made quite the impact in her educational career and community, be it formally in the classroom or informally as a longtime parent volunteer.

Recently, Zwemer was presented with the 2024 Distinguished Lakeshore Educator Award, presented by the United Way of the Lakeshore.

In her 10th year as an interventionist at Whitehall District Schools’ Ealy Elementary, Zwemer was nominated for the award by six parents of students she’s impacted.

“It means even more that it was parents that made the nomination. I mean, that’s what our job is here, right, to take care of kids and their families,” Zwemer said. “The fact that parents recognize that is huge. It’s an even bigger honor. I don’t want to cry, but it means a lot.”

Zwemer’s educational career began in the 1990s in the Berkley School District on the east side of the state, where she taught kindergarten and first grade for 10 years total at Angell Elementary.

The Zwemers moved west to her hometown, where their two children graduated. Daughter Hannah Zwemer-Huerta is a 2013 Whitehall alumna, while son Jack Zwemer is a 2017 WHS alum.

While raising children, Jenn Zwemer dedicated much of her time as a parent volunteer and WDS greatly benefitted.

Prior to his time as Ealy Elementary principal, Ron Bailey taught and had Zwemer's son in his classroom. That's when Bailey met Zwemer.

When Bailey became principal, he re-engaged with Zwemer and they discussed career opportunities. He wasted no time hiring her as an interventionist, a role in which she helps students learn to read.

"Since then, Jenn has been amazing," Bailey said. "She's taken the time on her own to learn more, gone to professional development on her own, intentionally wanting to learn more about how kids read and what does it take to get to that point.

"It's truly a passion of hers to help kids meet their expectations of what they can be. Having her earn this award as basically the volunteer of the year is truly her. There's not a greater volunteer that I've ever met, who has the same (drive), the passion that Jenn has for helping. Without a doubt, she is someone who looks, 'Where can I fill a need?' It's basically service above self – the kind of the mantra that Jenn lives by."

Amber Rumsey, Regional Childhood Coordinator for the United Way of the Lakeshore, presented Zwemer with a Distinguished Lakeshore Educator certificate and a cart of various school supplies.

Rumsey said that "Stuff the Bus" has been going on for more than a decade at the United Way of the Lakeshore, but the organization launched its Distinguished Lakeshore Educator awards in the last year.

United Way of the Lakeshore issues the award to one educator in each school district per year in Muskegon, Newaygo, and Oceana counties. Educators are nominated via a link that can typically be found on the United Way of the Lakeshore's social-media pages or website.

"We know that families are very dedicated to our educators," Rumsey said. "We know that educators frequently don't get recognition, so we wanted to make sure that we were showing them that we appreciate them and giving families an avenue to appreciate them as well.

"It was the work that Jenn did with their students that really sold her," Rumsey added. "They were talking about her dedication and passion to her students, how she always found ways to make things work for them even when it wasn't always obvious at first. There was definitely that dedication to her students, shown through her nominations."

Zwemer is well-respected at Ealy Elementary and she possesses a giving heart.

Among her numerous volunteer efforts include work with non-profits in Muskegon County such as Read Muskegon, White Lake Area Women, Friends of the Playhouse, and The Tapestry, to name a handful.

Zwemer was an active member of the PTO during and well beyond the years her children were in school, according to friend and colleague Stacey Lohman, who is Administrative Assistant at Ealy Elementary.

“I have known Jenn since she enrolled her children at Shoreline and was a parent volunteer 20-plus years ago,” said Lohman, who has gotten to know Zwemer both at Ealy and in the community. “Jenn was a parent who was always the first to offer a helping hand with any event or task the school was having.”

These days, it is a rare occasion when you’ll see Zwemer walking the Ealy hallways without her sidekick, Remington. “Rem” is a 12-year-old Goldendoodle and beloved therapy dog.

Zwemer said that in 2017 she explored making Remington a therapy dog, going through training and certification. He began accompanying her to school one day a week, then it became two days a week.

Now, Rem is a fixture at the school and he appears to have a heart like his owner.

“Jenn will be the first to respond offering her famous treats (for) any school celebration or support during hard times. Remington, ‘Remi,’ is her service dog that has also supported many students and staff at Ealy,” said Lohman, who noted that you’ll also find Zwemer and Remington volunteering at Helen DeVos Children’s Hospital.

“At school, she has a gentle way of connecting with students and seeing their potential all while meeting them where they are at and supporting and encouraging them to become their best self. I am fortunate to work with (her) and call her my friend.”

Simply put, Zwemer views her role at Ealy Elementary as giving students tools to become stronger readers.

She does it well, but as many will attest, her contributions go far beyond that.

“I have the best job in the world. I get to help kids learn to become better readers,” said Zwemer, who acknowledged that she keeps doing it because of the “kids and amazing people at Ealy.”

“I think it’s really important that the school prepares (students) for life and survival and loving each other and being kind to each other, and I think we do that well here,” Zwemer said. “I’m very honored and proud to be working here in this district.”