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Bristow teacher honored for being a 'lighthouse'

By JAKE MOORE jake.moore@bgdailynews.com

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Avery Wilmurth, a first-year fourth-grade English teacher at Bristow Elementary, has won a Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Lighthouse Award.

Grace Ramey/grace.ramey@bgdailynews.com

When Avery Wilmurth received an email stating she was a finalist for a national teaching award, she figured it was junk.

“I thought it was a scam, so I deleted it,” she said.

The email was legit. Unbeknownst to Wilmurth, her mentor at the school, Lyndsey Duke-Brooks, had nominated her for the Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Lighthouse Awards.

“She came into my room the next day and was like, ‘did you get an email from HMH?’ And I was like, ‘yeah, I deleted it,’ ” Wilmurth recalled.

Fortunately, she recovered the message in time.

Wilmurth, a 2022 Western Kentucky University graduate in her first full year of teaching fourth grade English at Bristow Elementary, went on to become one of 10 teachers to win the inaugural award.

Education technology company HMH, in partnership with author Steve Pemberton and Carmen Ortiz-McGhee, announced the winners on Monday, the start of national Teacher Appreciation Week.

Pemberton penned 2021’s “The Lighthouse Effect: How Ordinary People Can Have an Extraordinary Impact in the World,” which served as the inspiration for the award. The book spotlights people in Pemberton’s life that stood out

as “human lighthouses,” Ortiz-McGhee, chief financial officer for the National Association of Insurance Commissioners, being one of them.

“As I read through the nominations, I felt as if I was brought into the classrooms of each teacher, and was in awe of their daily commitments,” Pemberton said in a release.

Ortiz-McGhee stated she was “deeply moved by each teacher’s story, knowing that, because of them, their students will be inspired and empowered to live into their full potential.”

According to HMH’s site, the company received nominations for over 500 teachers. The honors went to those who embody the characteristics of a “teacher lighthouse” – someone who is “humble, steady and seeks no recognition for the work they do.”

Wilmurth’s mother, father and stepmother all served as teachers at one point in their careers. She was surrounded by so many educators growing up she figured “everyone wanted to be a teacher.”

“That’s the only job that I thought existed, really,” she joked. “That’s just what you do, you just grow up and be a teacher I never thought about doing anything else.”



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Wilmurth was recognized specifically for helping her kids reach their expected reading levels.

“Not every student got brought up to benchmark, but pretty much every student had growth,” she said, “which is what you want. You want them to just be able to do better than they started out as.”

Wilmurth said from fall to winter, her students had the “third-highest growth in the district” in reading levels.

Her classes were frequently broken up into “stations,” where students worked in small groups, addressing key areas of need.

“They had a lot of time built into class where they were working on what they specifically were struggling with. I think that helped a lot,” Wilmurth said.

She also worked to find students’ comfortable reading capabilities to prevent kids starting at a lower level from becoming discouraged.

“If you’re trying to throw stuff at them that’s like fourth grade (level) and they’re not there yet, it just brings them down,” Wilmurth said. “So we just tried to meet them where they were ... I think that’s why they grew, because they weren’t being challenged too much, like where it was too high for them.”

She said her degree didn’t prepare her for everything.

“I feel like in college, you learn how to plan a lesson but that’s about it,” she said. “As a teacher, it’s not just about the lesson planning. You’re like their mother for eight hours a day.”

Wilmurth said she appreciated the school staff for helping her along in year one.

“Anytime I have anything that I need help with, I know I can text our principal or run into a teacher and they’ve always been able to help me out, which is really good,”

Wilmurth said. “Not everybody gets that at a school.”

Duke-Brooks said Wilmurth’s name immediately came to mind when deciding who to nominate.

“She is someone who has lots of needs in her classroom and she has gone above and beyond for them from day one,” Duke-Brooks said. “Not everything has been perfect, but she has learned from every experience.”

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