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DPI-NR 2018-47 E

Monday, May 14, 2018

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Benjamin Grignon named a 2019 High School Teacher of the Year

Menominee Indian educator to receive \$3,000 from Herb Kohl Educational Foundation

MADISON – In a surprise ceremony at his school today, Benjamin Grignon, teacher of traditional Menominee crafts at Menominee Indian High School in Keshena, was named a Wisconsin 2019 High School Teacher of the Year.

State Superintendent Tony Evers made the announcement during an all-school assembly. As part of the Teacher of the Year honor, Grignon will receive \$3,000 from the Herb Kohl Educational Foundation.

“Our teachers wear many hats, yet their dedication to children is constant,” said State Superintendent Tony Evers. “From the classroom to the conference room to the community, they focus on our kids and their education. It is an honor to recognize educators who do so much for Wisconsin’s students and our public schools.”

Herb Kohl, philanthropist, businessman, and co-sponsor of the Wisconsin Teacher of the Year program through his educational foundation, said he supports the program because “I want to help teachers pursue their unrealized goals for their classroom, their school, or their professional development.”

As a teacher of traditional arts, specifically Menominee arts, Grignon is unique in the world. “I work with students not only on the art forms of our people, but the language and cultural practices that go along with these arts,” he said. He works with science teachers to incorporate plant and mushroom identification and the chemistry of mordants and plants for dyeing weaving and basketry projects. Students learn geometry formulas as they design loom beadwork based on the geometric forms that are part of ancient Menominee aesthetics. “I am constantly finding opportunities to use our culture to reinforce other subjects in our school,” he said.

Grignon shows deep respect for the elder teachers, saying he strives to pass the knowledge on to the next generation of Menominee youth. “My students are taught about menacehaew (respect) for themselves, each other, and for the knowledge passed on to us from the elders.” He incorporates language

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learning into everyday tasks. Many of the expressions Grignon uses become a part of students' everyday conversations, and students depend on the classroom community for help when they forget the Menominee language term for something.

“Within Menominee culture, we have a belief that you should never create something if your mind is troubled,” Grignon related. He uses classroom meditation to help students center themselves and offers alternatives for those who feel they cannot make art that day. These actions are part of his effort to create a safe place for students to learn and support programming to address Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which are prevalent in the high-poverty district. Grignon notes that through traditional art and symbolism, students reflect Menominee history in their creations, but also their present and future. He says that the elements in students' work, the symbols and colors they use, allow them to share something about themselves, the struggles they face, and the accomplishments they have achieved.

Grignon serves as vice chairman of the Menominee Language and Culture Commission. The panel oversees immersion efforts at the Menominee Tribal Daycare, which is using a program based on the Language Nest idea developed by the Maori of New Zealand. As co-founder of the Mawaw Ceseniyah Center for Language, Culture, and the Arts, Grignon helps lead traditional experiences such as maple tree tapping, wild rice gathering, and storytelling activities that unite the school and community. By working with the University of Wisconsin Extension, Grignon was able to establish a Menominee Immersion Club at the high school that uses language to cook healthy foods. His principal notes that Grignon's positive effect on the student body afterschool is so great that he's had to request special busing so students can get home. Principal Jim Reif also commends Grignon as a resource for non-Menominee educators, calling Grignon “an irreplaceable embodiment of what it means to be a revered Menominee leader and teacher.”

In addition to working at Menominee Indian High School, Grignon teaches community art workshops at East-West University and the College of Menominee Nation. He previously worked at the Menominee Tribal School in Neopit, teaching kindergarten through eighth-grade Menominee Language classes. He earned an associate's degree in fine art from the Institute of American Indian Art in Santa Fe, N. M. He holds a bachelor's degree in fine art from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a master's of fine art from the University of Arizona in Tucson. Grignon earned his teaching certification through Concordia University's Appleton campus.

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