

Love for children guides Tanner's teaching

By Judy Hogan

Maria Tanner, a bilingual English as Second Language (ESL) teacher at Virginia Cross Elementary School (VCE), feels that she can be most effective as a teacher of the little ones.

"I don't have a thick enough skin for the older kids," she admits. I observed her with her ESL third-graders and saw their obvious affection for her, expressed by an Indian child, Shristi: "I like you, Mrs. Tanner, because you like me. When you were not here, I missed you, too."

"The little ones know they need to learn English and work very hard. The older students, by and large, see no point in learning a foreign language, even Spanish, which is now spoken by so many people in the U.S.," she said.

Maria was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Her father was in the army, and she spent much of her childhood there. In 1965, when she was 10, her family moved to the U.S. because her father was stationed at Fort Jackson, S.C. She had already learned English as it was taught in all the Puerto Rican schools.

Maria received a B.S. in Social Work from UNC-G and met her husband, Billy, while in Greensboro. When they moved to Siler City, she worked first in the Sunbridge nursing home as a social worker. She decided against continuing as a social worker, tried various jobs, and by 1989 she was teaching Spanish in Horton Middle School and in Moncure

School (K-8). At that time all grades received Spanish instruction. She was able to begin teaching under a program called Lateral Entry while she studied for her teaching certificate at UNC-Greensboro.

Later she taught Spanish I-IV to grades 10-12 at Jordan Matthews for 10 years. In 2000 she began working with third and fourth grade ESL students at Siler City Elementary, which was increasingly crowded until the fall of 2007, when many of those students were able to move to the new Virginia Cross School. While VCE was under construction, Siler City Elementary had so little space that she sometimes taught her small group of ESL students in the library, and on the other side of the bookshelf divider children were receiving Exceptional Children instruction.

At first living in Siler City was hard for her. She had been taught English by a nun from the North, and at first she didn't understand people's accents or word choices, e.g., "mater" for tomato. But since she began teaching, she feels more part of the community. Her husband is the principal of Liberty Elementary in Randolph County.

I asked Maria what makes a good teacher. "It takes dedication and high motivation. You have to go beyond the minimum. It takes more than 40 hours a week to do a good job. You need curiosity and a desire to continue learning." For her part, she obtained the National Board Certification and a Master's in Literacy from UNC-Chapel Hill. She

WOMEN OF CHATHAM



Maria Tanner, holding Katie
PHOTO BY JOHN SHILLITO

have all the vocabulary they need to grasp all of the classroom presentation. She also works right in the classroom with the teachers in the language arts block, right now with vocabulary help for the whole class. She thinks that this approach of working both in the classroom and in small groups is very constructive and helps keep both teachers and students on their toes.

Maria also translates and interprets as needed both at the school and for the Chatham County Schools administrators, helping with meetings, letters, etc.

Maria loves to work outside in her garden when she has free time and also to decorate her home, not only by painting but also by making throw pillows, etc. She used to make all her own clothes. She and her sisters learned to sew when they were growing up.

Her main issue of concern for our county is the economy in Siler City. The closing of the Pilgrim Pride chicken plant hits local families hard as well as the whole community.

Maria's advice to herself (and others) is "to be true to myself, stay with my values, not to impose on others, but to stand up for myself." Her values? "The Golden Rule."

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feels that it's important to meet the families and learn as much as possible about each child.

I asked her how she feels about the new approach to ESL students that Virginia Cross is using. Sometimes Maria and the other ESL teachers pull out small groups to work with (the more usual approach), but they focus on subjects that the children are studying in the classroom, e.g., sound and hearing. Having extra work on the curriculum is helpful as the children don't yet



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Life and Faith 101. Got Questions?
Dialog with authors James Efirm and Paul Harms,
Sunday, August 3 — Tuesday, August 5
Central Carolina Community College, 7-9 p.m.

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The SoulJourn Living Earth Music Fest
Fescue 911 and headliner Bill Malonee from Athens, GA, 6 p.m. Tickets \$10 at the show only.
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www.billmallonee.net

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 1

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