

A charitable formula

Former SJHS students surprise retiring math teacher with donation effort

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ST. JOSEPH — After a quarter century worth of teaching math, Dave Foster is hanging up his protractor.

As someone who began teaching at St. Joseph High School in 1990, Foster had a significant influence on his students over the years. So much so, he was presented with a surprise partway through his retirement party Saturday.

What Foster didn't know was two of his former students — with the help of his wife and daughter, Becky and Alison Foster — had been trying to raise \$25,000 in 25 days for his 25 years of service. The money raised would go to a chairity known as Pencils of Promise, which would build a school in Ghana named after Foster.

Underneath the tent's canopy the family had set up in their backyard, Foster was told of the charitable effort that was taken

on behalf of his tutelage.

"Not many people get to finish a career where people come and do this," Foster said. "I made every moment as passionate as I could, hoping it would make a difference. This is proof."

The students behind the idea were Zach Feters and Seth Walsh, who graduated from SJHS in 2009 and now live in different parts of the country.

Feters, who lives in Houston and works for BP Oil, said he was reading an article about Pencils of Promise and liked the idea of its goal to further education in developing countries.

Thinking it was something better to pursue than the usual retirement gift, Feters began brainstorming with the others. The message behind the gift was to emulate one of Foster's life lessons: Education is not a means to a high-paying job, but a way

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John Madill / HP correspondent

Becky Foster talks about her husband Dave's teaching career and the goal of raising enough money to go toward building a school in Ghana in his name. About 50 friends, family members and co-workers gathered for a retirement party Saturday to honor the St. Joseph High School math teacher.

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to make an impact in the world.

“He is the person that you go through high school and hear all these stories about and get excited to have as a teacher,” Fetters said. “He was one of the first teachers I had that said education should have an impact on the community. This will be a way to spread his legacy and the teachings he has given to us.”

Walsh, who lives in Cincinnati and works in community development, said he wanted to give back to the man that had given him so much.

“Everything I do in Cincinnati was something I learned from his class,” Walsh said. “He taught you why learning matters. My entire life has changed because of him.”

The main takeaway for Walsh was the gift would go beyond Foster or his impact on the community. It would allow the tenured math teacher to keep changing lives of other people – some he would never meet, in places he would never go.

On his own time

Foster’s path to such love and admiration came after he graduated from the University of Michigan.

Before settling down with his wife and two kids, and before he became known to everyone as “Mr. Foster,” the St. Joseph resident worked in finance for a year and discovered he hated it.

At the time, Foster had

also been a camp counselor and thought teaching would be a good idea. Foster jokes he loved Ann Arbor so much he came back for his teaching degree. Upon graduation, he landed his first teaching job in a private school in Bloomfield Hills as a math teacher.

The experience was eye-opening, but Becky said they realized Bloomfield Hills was too large of a city they were never going to be a part of it.

“We wanted to be part of a community,” Becky said. “Now we are here and we have a community. Around town people come up to me and say, ‘oh, you’re Mr. Foster’s wife.’ And then they go on to tell me some crazy story about something he did in the classroom.”

Becky said it was hard to keep the fundraising effort a secret from her husband because of all the community effort.

When she looked online at the Facebook page they had created, Becky saw the comments everyone had written about her husband.

In addition to the money raised in his honor, Foster was given a new email account filled with messages from past students and colleagues. Those who donated had sent in words of congratulations from across the country and overseas.

“It’s one of those things where we will give him the password and let him read it on his own time,” Walsh said.

While Fetters and Walsh could not make it to the retirement party, their pres-

ence was felt through Foster’s thanks and appreciation.

Staying true to his alma mater, Foster addressed his guests adorned in his striped U-M polo, with matching blue and yellow sneakers.

“It means a lot to see these guys trying to make a difference in the world because of me,” Foster said upon hearing his two former students were involved. “That’s something any teacher can be proud of.”

More to come

The effort raised nearly \$19,000 by Saturday, but the 25-day deadline will be extended as long as it takes to ensure the school is built in Foster’s honor.

Those who wish to help can donate at: <https://fundraise.pencilsofpromise.org/fundraise?fcid=455955>.

Students who want to share their favorite memories of Foster can write him by email to the user account: thankyoumrfoster@gmail.com.

As for his decision to retire, Foster said he wanted to leave when he was at his best. He recalled a time last week during his last class of the day when he realized he only had a few days left. Foster said he was forced to leave the room because he was on the brink of tears.

“It’s a feeling, not a formula,” Foster said of his decision. “My biggest hope was to come to a town and make a difference. I feel loved and love them back for it.”

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