

# PRESS RELEASE

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## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**Date:** Tuesday, May 5, 2026  
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## Village of Gurnee Honors 2026 Teacher of the Year and Staff Member of the Year Recipients

GURNEE, IL – The Village of Gurnee is proud to announce the 2026 Gurnee Teacher of the Year Award Recipients: Rocco Oddo (Warren Township High School District 121), Jessica Pierson (Woodland District 50), and Betsy Sincora (Gurnee District 56).

In addition to the Teacher of the Year Awards, the 2026 Staff Member of the Year Award Recipients: Toni Ludwick (Warren Township High School District 121), Brandi Smith (Woodland District 50), and Miriam Yaquian (Gurnee District 56).

These prestigious awards are a testament to the collaborative efforts of the Village, local school districts, and late business owner Donald Henderson, under the leadership of Mayor Tom Hood. These awards recognize the outstanding achievements of peer-nominated recipients from each district for their exceptional service to students, schools, and the community.

Rocco Oddo has dedicated more than 40 years to education, coaching, athletics and the arts. He began his career in 1985 in Ohio, coaching high school sports while working and building his own art business. After earning his degree from Bowling Green State University in 1992, he served as a Graduate Assistant Football Coach before moving on to Illinois State University as an Assistant Football Coach and teacher. In 1994, he became an art teacher and coach at Normal Community High School before joining Warren Township High School in 1997, a decision he considers the most impactful of his career.

At Warren, Rocco taught art, coached football and track, and served as Fine Arts Lead Teacher from 2011 to 2026. A passionate artist, he developed a highly successful ceramics program serving around 500 students each year and founded the Live the Arts Festival in 2011, now one of the school's largest community events. Dr. Danny Woestman, Superintendent of Warren Township High School, describes Rocco as an innovative leader who leads by example and consistently elevates those around him. He has been instrumental in expanding and strengthening the school's art curriculum, including the development of rigorous AP courses that challenge students to reach their highest artistic potential.

Rocco's unwavering dedication to his students is matched by his positive attitude and approachable nature, making him highly respected and admired by both staff and students. More than an art teacher, he cultivates an environment where creativity thrives, students feel confident expressing themselves, and a culture of excellence is both encouraged and achieved. Rocco embodies the very best of Warren Township High School District's mission.

Jessica Pierson has been selected as the Woodland District 50 winner for the Village of Gurnee Teacher of the Year Award for the 2025-2026 school year. Ms. Pierson is the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Itinerant

Teacher for the district. She started at Woodland in August 2020 and works with students and families at all four district schools.

Jessica was selected because of her knowledge, expertise and advocacy for deaf and hard of hearing students and their families. She takes great care in helping her students integrate into the general education classroom while also helping classmates understand how they can be a good “hearing friend.” She also provides opportunities for her students to step into the role of teacher to educate others about the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community.

This year, Ms. Pierson’s students presented to teachers and classmates about their accommodations and assistive technology. Students have helped explain the importance of not using the word “nevermind” because it can make them feel left out, provided classmates with opportunities to ask questions about deafness, read books featuring deaf and hard of hearing characters, and taught basic sign language. Two students also worked with Woodland’s School Resource Officers to teach them signs and tips to use during emergency situations with deaf and hard of hearing people in the community. Through her guidance and advocacy, Ms. Pierson is raising awareness, championing inclusion and showing students that they belong in the W.

Mrs. Betsy Sincora, named the 2026 Gurnee Teacher of the Year, has dedicated 24 years to District 56 as a Kindergarten and 1st grade teacher, spending 23 of those years at Gurnee Grade School and River Trail School. Throughout her career, she has demonstrated a strong commitment to early childhood education, laying strong academic and social foundations for her students. Her classroom is known as a nurturing, engaging environment where the youngest students feel supported, challenged and inspired to grow.

Mrs. Sincora’s passion for teaching and deep understanding of child development have made her a trusted and respected educator among students, families and colleagues. Beyond the classroom, she is a leader within River Trail School and District 56, mentoring three colleagues and helping guide the next generation of educators. Her involvement in multiple committees, including ELA, Math, School Improvement, PBIS, the social committee and the District Behavior Committee, reflects her dedication to continuous improvement and collaboration. Over the past 24 years, Mrs. Sincora has made an incredible and lasting impact on hundreds of children, shaping not only their academic growth but also their confidence, curiosity and love of learning.

Toni Ludwick is being recognized as this school year’s Support Staff Educator of the Year for her outstanding contributions to the Warren Township High School community. With nearly 30 years of service in the Special Education Department, including her time with WTHS since 2005, Toni has consistently gone above and beyond for both students and staff. She is widely known for her positive attitude, strong work ethic, and the reliability, care and professionalism she brings to her role each day.

Cara Garland, Director of Special Education at Warren Township High School, says Toni is an incredibly diligent professional who takes immense pride in her work. She is highly detailed, organized and thorough, with an exceptional ability to manage complex administrative responsibilities while maintaining a high level of accuracy. Cara further notes that Toni’s professionalism and integrity set a high standard, making her a true role model within the department. Her contributions have made a lasting impact on the O’Plaine campus, and she will be deeply missed by both staff and students.

As she looks ahead to retirement, Toni is excited to begin a new chapter by relocating to Florida this fall, spending cherished time with her grandson, Oliver, and enjoying family, friends and a well-deserved future.

Brandi Smith has been selected as the Woodland District 50 winner for the Village of Gurnee Staff of the Year Award for the 2025-2026 school year. Ms. Smith is a Hall Monitor at Woodland Middle School. She started at Woodland in August 2023 and works diligently to ensure students feel safe, supported and successful.

At the middle school level, students change classes throughout the day, making supervision during passing periods an important part of the school environment. For Ms. Smith, this is an opportunity to connect with students. She greets students by name and with a smile, making sure every child feels seen and respected. The example she sets makes her a true leader in the school, and students seek her out for conversations and advice. They know Ms. Smith will be there for them on a hard day and will provide the encouragement they need to keep moving forward.

In addition to her Hall Monitor responsibilities, Ms. Smith has helped transform the ROAR Store and the reward system for promoting positive behavior. She also helps mentor students through her work with the Black Student Leaders group. Ms. Smith has helped change the climate and culture at Woodland Middle School by showing students that she believes in them and by modeling the mutual respect that is a cornerstone of #LifeintheW.

Ms. Miriam Yaquian, the 2026 Gurnee Support Staff of the Year, has served as a dedicated Special Education Teacher Assistant at River Trail School for the past six years. During that time, she has become an important part of the school community, known for her commitment to students and staff alike. Currently pursuing her bachelor's degree in Elementary Education, Ms. Yaquian continues to grow professionally and will take the next step in her journey as a student teacher at River Trail this fall. Her passion for education and drive to support all learners are evident in everything she does.

Colleagues describe Ms. Yaquian as an exceptional bilingual educator and one of the most valuable members of the staff, often sharing that they don't know what they would do without her. She plays a critical role in supporting communication with Spanish-speaking families, translating important information during IEP meetings with clarity, confidence and care while building trust and strong relationships with families. She is remarkable with students, providing targeted support in small groups, assisting seamlessly in general education classrooms and fostering a calm, positive learning environment. Flexible, reliable and resourceful, Ms. Yaquian consistently steps in wherever she is needed, approaching every task with professionalism and heart.

Regarding the awards, Mayor Tom Hood said, "This annual event recognizes outstanding educators and staff members for their continued dedication to our students, schools and community. Now in its 12th year, it has been a joy to watch this program grow and to see our schools embrace the opportunity to celebrate those who go above and beyond, inspire those around them and set a standard of excellence for others to follow"

Mayor Tom Hood, Chloe Henderson of the Henderson Foundation, and each school district's corresponding representatives were present at the Monday, May 4th Village Board meeting to award the winners. In addition to a plaque recognizing their achievement, each teacher and staff member will be given a monetary contribution from the Henderson Foundation.

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