

Taylor plans to 'sparkle on'

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CATHY WOGAN

ThisWeek Staff Writer

"It's the perfect time to 'sparkle on,'" said Debbie Taylor, who is more commonly known to the community as "Mrs. Sparkles."

She got the name years ago when her nieces and nephews dubbed her "Aunt Sparkles" because of her glitzy wardrobe and sparkling personality. In time the name "Mrs. Sparkles" was attached to her by her students and it stuck.

"I haven't heard Mrs. Taylor for 15 years," she said, laughing. "Not since I started working with the unified arts program." Even her husband, Gary, lost his identity along the way as she dubbed him "Mr. Grumbles."

"He is the sweetest, dearest man," she said, "but he grumbles." Stephanie, her adult daughter, is known as "Sprinkles" and her adult son Brian was nicknamed "Sparky" as Taylor tries to "Sparklize" the world.

She has even created her own "sparklific" language.

Taylor, a unified arts teacher who works on music and movement with kindergarten through fifth grade students throughout the Hilliard City School District, would not be caught dead without her signature sequins, beads, glitter and loud colors.

One look at her sticker-covered guitar gives people the impression that she could be a left over hippie from the 1960s and 1970s era, but she does not mind.

Taylor said she cannot walk through a grocery store or sit down in a restaurant without someone recognizing her.

"I'm on my third generation now," she said of her current students as well as their parents and grandparents. "It's easy for them to recognize me, I have the same hairdo, the same husband and the same house I had 35 years ago. Maybe there's something wrong with me."

But her travels to all of the schools in the district are about to come to an end as she calls Feb. 29 her last day in education.

"I hate the world retirement," she said. "I see it as my coming out. I even play the song, 'I'm Coming Out'."



BY CHRIS PARKS/THISWEEK
Debbie Taylor, as known as Mrs. Sparkles, sings a song to students at Ridgewood Elementary School Tuesday, Feb. 19. She is retiring from the school district after 35 years.

Holding her arms in the air, she snaps her fingers and moves in time to the music playing in her head.

"It's Leap Year," she said. "Is that fitting or what?"

The blonde, blue-eyed vivacious woman is hoping to leap from the classroom to a television screen where her alter ego continues to touch the lives of children.

She said Captain Kangaroo, Lucy's Toy Shop and Mr. Rogers are all gone and it is time to replace them with someone who has the best interest of children at heart.

Taylor got her start as a kindergarten teacher 35 years ago and worked with the same age group for 20 years before switching to the unified arts program.

She estimates that she has already worked with more than 11,000 children, but she discovered that she likes an audience when she took to the stage during "Sparkle-Palooza" fund raiser. The concert was held after the devastation of the south by Hurricane Katrina. She wanted to reach out and help others, so the concert seemed like the perfect opportunity.

She did not know what to expect on a cold, rainy night, but was pleased as children filled the audience and she had an opportunity to work with three volunteer bands.

It made her realize that her childhood dream of being on the stage was far from dead.

"Ever since I was little I have wanted to play on a TV show," she said.

She has set 2010 as her target date for making all of her dreams come true.

Taylor said when she decides to do something it is hard to hold her back, like the time she won \$50,000 by appearing on "Wheel of Fortune" even though she flunked the initial test and her plans to make it on the "Deal or No Deal" show.

Her optimism and bubbly personality are real, according to Taylor.

"As long as my feet hit the floor in the morning, it is a good day," she said. "Even when my mother passed away I tried to find the good in it by saying she is in a better place."

At times, she said, it is difficult for "Mr. Grumbles."

"He lives the 'I Love Lucy Show'," she said. "I can't remember the last time I had a bad day. I believe if you expect happiness, you get it. What you put out, you get back. I try not to be grouchy, because you get more wrinkles."

Taylor admits that she tries to "lay low" on the weekends to "resparklize" for the classroom and she could easily become a "beach bum."

She is not sure exactly what the future will hold, but she has learned from experience that it is best to keep your options open.

When Assistant Superintendent Leslie McNaughton talked her into leaving the kindergarten classroom for a district-wide project she was skeptical, but it worked out.

Then when former Hilliard principal Patrick Callaghan urged her to work with special needs children she was frightened.

"I thought you had to be trained to be with special needs children," said Taylor. "I was scared to death. But he said 'You have nothing to do, but make them smile.'"

Several months after she began working with the special needs children, she was touched by a boy with autism. He had never spoken, and out poured the words "Mrs. Sparkles." It was at that moment Taylor knew she had done the right thing by trying something new.

She plans to host another Sparkle-Palooza on April 13 from 2 to 5 p.m. at the Makoy Center, and then she will settle into what she calls her "graduation" with a degree in "kinderology" as she embarks on a new stage of life.