

'Mrs. Sparkles' to pursue new career in show business

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She radiates cheerfulness. She glows with verve. She brightens a room with cheer, song and dance.

She's Debbie Taylor -- better known as "Mrs. Sparkles" in the Hilliard City School District -- and the time has come for her to begin a second career.

Taylor will be "sparkling on" Feb. 29, when she retires from her 35-year career as a Hilliard kindergarten teacher. For the past 17 years, she has specialized as the music and unified arts teacher for the little ones at Avery, Beacon, Britton, Hilliard Horizon and Ridgewood elementary schools.

There's a whole world out there, Taylor said, and she's got to follow her dream to "sparkle-ize" it.

But retirement won't mean that Taylor's closet full of sparkly clothes -- "It looks like Elvis died in there," she said -- will go to waste. Mrs. Sparkles is entering show business.

"I planted seeds with business that are starting to sprout, so I thought this may be a good time to 'sparkle on,'" she said.

Taylor began her career in the 1973-74 school year at J.W. Reason Elementary School. She taught at Beacon from 1974-80 and at Ridgewood from 1980-91. She's been the kindergarten music and unified arts teacher since the 1992-93 school year.

"If anyone calls me 'Mrs. Taylor,' I know what era they are from; that is, before I became Mrs. Sparkles," she said.

Mrs. Sparkles wasn't born, Taylor said. She evolved.

It began in the 1980s when Taylor took to the era's arty, sparkly clothing. Her nephews were the first to spot her emerging alter ego -- they started calling her "Aunt Sparkles."

"Somehow, I don't know how it happened, the students started calling me 'Sparkles' and I got 'sparkle-ized.' I have my own sparkle-vocabulary now," said Taylor.

Her students are sparkle-rangers, Taylor said, and their mission is to "sparkle-ize" the world, especially Taylor's replacement, new unified arts teacher Cara Boettner.

How exactly does one "sparkle-ize" the planet?

"By doing one or two nice things for somebody every day," said Taylor.

Taylor tells her students she'll have no "cold pricklies" in her room.

"No one can be mean," she said.

Children join her in making "a pinky promise to be just as nice as we can possibly be," she said.

Taylor estimates that she has taught 11,000 kindergartners, and her students rarely exhibited behavior problems.

"Sparkle-izing is a concept that really works," she said.

A few years ago, Taylor won a grant from the Hilliard Education Foundation to produce a CD of her sparkly songs titled Kaleidoscope. She created a singalong coloring book to go along with it.

The CD was a local hit and parents have been asking her to record more.

She's given away over 1,800 copies of Kaleidoscope -- many outside of school and with parental permission -- to children she sees out and about.

"If I see a child being nice, I say, 'You've been sparkle-ized,' and I give them a CD and a book," said Taylor.

Selling sparkle merchandise hasn't been a priority for Taylor. But it will become one after she retires and Taylor has gotten herself marketing and business managers.

Her agent and backup musician, Brian Preston of Hilliard -- or "Mr. Music," as he is known in the Mrs. Sparkles' show -- will remain with the new venture.

Professionals in the children's entertainment industry who caught her act had told Taylor that Mrs. Sparkles is marketable and encouraged her to shoot for the big time.

When some 500 people attended a Mrs. Sparkles benefit concert for Hurricane Katrina victims on a cold, rainy day at the Mill Run amphitheater, Taylor realized the pros just might be right.

"We made over \$3,000 to give to Katrina," Taylor said. "And when I was on stage, it was like: This is what I am supposed to do. I felt at home."

So, Taylor said, Mrs. Sparkles shall "shoot for the moon."

"If I miss, I'll land among the stars if I am following my dream," she said.

Look for more CDs and books, and maybe even TV appearances and a cartoon, she said.

Taylor has prepared students for her departure. She began last month by leaving her long-time sidekick, a monkey puppet dubbed "Mr. Monkey," at home.

She told students he went off to fulfill his lifelong dream, living at the zoo.

As the days count down to Feb. 29, Taylor said she is feeling less and less apprehensive about leaving teaching.

"Last month I was really sad, but now I'm getting excited," she said. "I was wondering if I was doing the right thing, but I am ready for act two. I am graduating. I feel like something big is going to happen."

As a parting gift, Taylor is going to make something big happen for Hilliard teachers.

She will perform a benefit concert this spring at the Makoy Center to start a Hilliard Education Foundation grant that benefits creative programs teachers want to introduce. An exact concert date has not yet been set.

Taylor lives in Hilliard with her husband, Gary, an electrical contractor. The couple have two grown children, both Hilliard Davidson High School alumni, Stephanie of Hilliard and Brian of Tampa, Fla.

Those seeking sparkle-izing may visit Taylor's Web site at mrssparkles.com.

"(I'll) shoot for the moon. If I miss, I'll land among the stars if I am following my dream.

--Debbie Taylor



SNP photo by Ben French

Hilliard City School District kindergarten teacher Debbie Taylor -- also known to students and staff as "Mrs. Sparkles" -- performs for a group of students at Britton Elementary School. Taylor will retire from teaching Feb. 29 to pursue a career in entertainment as her alter ego.

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