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DEBRA KAUFFMAN NAMED 2017 MARYLAND SCHOOL NURSE OF THE YEAR

Fountain Green Elementary nurse has been serving her school community for 14 years

Debra Kauffman, RN, school nurse at Fountain Green Elementary School and 14-year veteran of Harford County Public Schools (HCPS), was named the 2017 Maryland School Nurse of the Year by the Maryland Association of School Health Nurses (MASHN).

MASHN is a professional school nurse organization dedicated to promoting the role of school nurses in contributing to the health and educational success of students. The Maryland School Nurse of the Year honors someone who exemplifies the best in school nursing practice through clinical expertise, research and education, management, mentoring, advocacy and/or leadership.

This is the first time a Harford County school nurse has achieved this recognition.

“Mrs. Kauffman is the nurse every administrator dreams of having on his or her staff,” said Fountain Green Principal Alison Donnelly, who nominated Mrs. Kauffman for the state award. “Her extensive knowledge, attention to detail, and compassion make her an exceptional school nurse. Not only does she recognize and treat specific symptoms, but she also aids students in determining when they are anxious, upset, or tired. This holistic approach to caring for our students acknowledges how they are feeling, but also helps keep them in their classrooms and ready to learn.”

Mrs. Kauffman’s compassionate manner was at the forefront when two Fountain Green Elementary School students lost their mother to cancer. Mrs. Kauffman built a trusting relationship with the family while the mother was undergoing treatment. When the cancer returned as terminal, Mrs. Kauffman assured the mother her children would be cared for at school. After their mother’s passing, Mrs. Kauffman dedicated time to meet the emotional needs of the students, connecting and engaging with them to help them forget about a stomachache triggered by grief. She was instrumental in helping them learn to cope with their feelings in a healthy and productive manner.

Mrs. Kauffman is truly an advocate for her students and families. She maintains open communication and is able to identify workable solutions for every challenge she is faced with. She successfully incorporates the values of acceptance, caring, and kindness into each of her health lessons.

“Mrs. Kauffman manages an efficient and comprehensive health services program at Fountain Green Elementary School and always goes above and beyond expectation,” said Mary Nasuta, RN, MS, NCSN, nurse coordinator for HCPS. “She excels at the planning of care for students with chronic health concerns and was recognized nationally for her service to students with food allergies by The Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network in 2009.”

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PAGE TWO: HCPS NURSE NAMED MARYLAND NURSE OF THE YEAR

Successfully managing the care of students with food allergies is one of the many challenges Mrs. Kauffman faces. When she began her school career 14 years ago, there was one student in her building with an allergy. To date, she is responsible for 33 children with multiple food allergies. Mrs. Kauffman is able to keep these children safe while maintaining their social normalcy at school. She oversees safety in the cafeteria, classroom celebrations, and field trips and continually ensures the students and staff are aware of and educated on allergens. She works tirelessly to alleviate concerns from parents/guardians and takes great pride in the trust she has established with the Fountain Green Elementary families.

Jessica Glace, Fountain Green Elementary School parent of two students with food allergies, was impressed with the level of food allergy awareness at the school and credits Mrs. Kauffman's rigor and creativity for creating a school culture of mindfulness and acceptance.

"When my kindergartner was asked during Thanksgiving what he was thankful for, he responded 'Nurse Kauffman,'" said Ms. Glace.

Recognizing that anxiety and fear occur in young children, especially those with food allergies, Mrs. Kauffman became a participant in a research project with Johns Hopkins University and University of Connecticut called Child Anxiety Learning Modules (CALM). Cognitive behavior therapy is used to reduce fear, anxiety, and stress. Her involvement in this project has been invaluable while working with children and families dealing with food allergies.

Mrs. Kauffman contributes not only to her school community, but the HCPS Health Services Department as a whole. She is a sought-after mentor for transitioning new school nurses to the county and readily shares her best practices, as well as advice and sound reasoning. She instructs new staff in the Delegation Class required by the Maryland Board of School Nurses. Mrs. Kauffman supports the nurse coordinator for the school system, using her clinical expertise to help field questions as needed. She has been instrumental in revising the school system's health handbooks, protocols and manuals, always seeking to improve the care provided to students.

"We are extremely proud of Mrs. Kauffman as the state honors her dedication and contributions to the health of our students," said Superintendent of Schools Barbara P. Canavan. "I have known Mrs. Kauffman for many years, and this title is well deserved!"

Mrs. Kauffman earned her associate's degree in nursing from Harford Community College in 1976, now having 41 years of experience as a registered nurse. Prior to her becoming a school nurse, she completed 27 years as a medical/surgical nurse. Throughout her career, she has been a member of MASHN, National Association of School Nurses (NASN), the Harford School Health Services Association, and the Harford County Nurses Association, often serving in leadership roles for those organizations. She is a member of Fountain Green Elementary School's Safety Committee and serves as the school's Indoor Air Quality Coordinator. She is a former Harford County Nurse of the Year (2008-2009). In addition, she has volunteered with Harford Family House, Girl Scouts, Daisy's, and Healthy Harford.

As the Maryland Nurse of the Year, Mrs. Kauffman will be honored at the annual MASHN conference and have her registration fee to attend the conference waived and she will be honored by the NASN as the Maryland Affiliate School Nurse of the Year.

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