

I Love My Librarian!

2017 Award

Sheikla Blount

Columbiana Middle School
Columbiana, Alabama

Nominator: Jason Mayfield

1. Please tell us in 2-3 sentences why your nominee should win this award. What sets them apart?

Ms. Blount has had to fight and create everything that's good in that library. She hasn't had resources, finances, or really any encouragement to do the exceptional job that she's done. Time and again, she's risen to a standard far above anyone at the school and in the county. She was the first National Board certified teacher we ever had and was still the only one we'd ever had when she went through re-certification. Moreover, she has continually reinvented her media center programs to encourage all manners of readers: reluctant, advanced, and everyone else.

2. How has the nominee helped you and/or students at school? For example, did the nominee help you with a project, recommend resources or collaborate with you to enhance student learning?

Ms. Blount has helped a lot over the past 10 years. In just this past year, in addition to what she did with the students, she mentored a high school senior who wants to become a librarian. The student had been through the middle school and even then knew she wanted to be a librarian. Four years later, she had the opportunity to have a teaching internship for her senior year and she asked to return to the middle school to work with Ms. Blount.

This student was headed to a major four-year college on full scholarship so there wasn't any "saving" needed; nevertheless, Ms. Blount stretched and grew that student over the year. She had the student volunteer twice a week to work in my classroom. As she explained, "A librarian's job is not just sorting books all day so she needs to work in a classroom to get the full experience." With the senior's help, my students were able to publish a creative book of their own.

All last year as well, Ms. Blount helped me with my National Board certification work. Her knowledge and encouragement helped me pursue a professional goal that had tremendous benefit for my students. In years past, we have collaborated on several projects to enhance student learning. In particular, her "Read More, Read Better" campaign was helpful in getting my students to read with more frequency. That was over

a time period where we had several students qualify for high academic honors, and I believe Ms. Blount's work helped facilitate those honors.

Additionally though, and at a simple level, Ms. Blount has just made the library a welcoming place to be. The previous librarian wouldn't open until two weeks into the school year. She would close the entire month of May to inventory. Ms. Blount has always been welcoming Day 1. Time and again during the first week of school, even prior to her official library orientation, Ms. Blount throws open the doors for students to check books out. She has always opened the library for reading and project work in the mornings before school starts. Last year, she gave up her planning time for advisory students to use the library to meet.

I have the identified gifted learners at the middle school, and I have time and again gone to Ms. Blount for recommendations for new screenings for students. She has helped me identify under-represented groups in the gifted community: in particular, African-American students. She has always been a model to minority students at the school as an example of someone who has pursued excellence. She has been a tireless advocate for minority author inclusion at the county level during book competitions, and her work with me has allowed many bright kids to qualify for gifted services who otherwise might have been overlooked. Ms. Blount has helped create and sponsor programs, two big ones being a book competition and two teams at the Junior United Nations Assembly, and she has always reserved her picks for those teams outside the usual kids who get picked to do usual things. In other words, she has taken upon herself to sponsor teams that didn't exist prior at the school and she filled the rosters with students who weren't previously connected with an after-school activity.

Ms. Blount has been a help to the school as well on projects that no other faculty member stepped up for. Currently, she is our yearbook sponsor and part of our School Improvement Team, neither jobs that she was especially qualified for except that no one else volunteered and so she took on the tasks, even though she's well beyond needed the jobs in order to impress anyone.

3. How does the nominee make the school a better place? Please be specific.

Ms. Blount has made a continual difference over the years. Initially, it was her kindness that transformed the library. She continues even today to remind us English teachers to send student suggestions for books. Now, the reality is that the students are under-read compared to Ms. Blount and her knowledge, but she has always sought their suggestions and input into making a better library. In her first years, she opened the library earlier and closed it later, both in a school day and on the calendar, than what had been expected prior by the librarian.

Ms. Blount's professionalism was the next thing that was noticed in making this school better. I was up against her for Teacher of the Year a few years ago when she pulled out. Even though she had been nominated, she declared that a teaching award wasn't something the librarian should win. Despite the fact that there are no county and state recognitions of the library media specialist, she has always held that high ethical position;

otherwise, she would've been our winner long ago. She became nationally board certified years ago; she was renewed a year ago. She was our first national boards faculty member. She has created a path forward for me to pursue that goal and was an encouragement in my pursuit last year.

She has sponsored many clubs for the students, most of them from her creation. Years ago, she helped create a county book competition called Battle of the Books. She served on that committee and as the school sponsor for just a few years because there was another faculty member who wanted the supplement (when it was created) for sponsor – and this allowed her to take on another unfunded sponsorship: JUNA. Ms. Blount has taken a group to the JUNA assembly for five-plus years now. It's an all-day affair for our students to go to the “big city” of Birmingham. We are always the school no one knows about and can't locate. Our competition is from the well-financed, suburban school districts and yet Ms. Blount's teams have not only placed but won in several competitions.

Ms. Blount's bookshelves are filled with diverse, age-appropriate titles. Whenever there have been books that turned out to be out of the tastes of the community, Ms. Blount has always found a home for those books, whether fighting to keep them in our library or sending them on to the high school. For years on the Battle of the Books committee, she was the lone minority voice and often had to speak up for inclusion. I know the one year I attended the meeting, she was given the final word on whether or not the books suggested were inclusive enough and she then advocated for an African-American writer to be included.

4. How has the library, and the nominee in particular, had an impact on students and the learning process?

Ms. Blount has worked from year to year to implement the school's yearly learning objectives. She has always worked with the English/Language Arts teachers to teach the research process. She has opened her doors early and helped tremendously with the social studies research projects the students tackle. Her library has often hosted special speakers just as when the sixth grade students listened to a Vietnam War veteran.

Beyond the year to year goals, Ms. Blount has encouraged lifelong habits of reading and learning. She created reading programs at the school that have encouraged the students in several habits of being a good reader. Initially, she created a “Read More, Read Better” campaign that offered students incentives for keeping up with the page totals of their independent reading. She worked through the English teachers to keep track of the logs, and she worked to create a silent auction for the students who earned points throughout the school year. After a few years of that program, she tweaked it to offer prizes and incentives for students who just met certain page or book totals. She didn't want the “top” readers fighting over page totals so the focus became encouraging every student to meet a certain minimum standard. For the past two years, she's worked to create incentives for students who keep their library account in good standing. For years, students were sent reminders on late fees and fines; however, her focus became to create something positive for the students who renewed and returned in a timely fashion. She has partnered with the

public library in their summer reading efforts and their efforts to create a student advisory board. Several of her former students have served on the public library council after their time at the middle school.

Chiefly, her library meets a critical need by getting books into student hands. I teach at her school and know firsthand that student access to books is very limited outside of the school. Very few of the students go to the public library. Many of them have parents who will not buy reading material. I have seen this time and again with my summer reading list for my class. We do not have the Title I money that our elementary feeder schools have to give students books – to keep – so Ms. Blount has worked to build and maintain a library with very little outside support. Additionally, she has worked to get technology, e-readers and tablets, into student hands and available through checkout. Her library serves a unique and critical need that you might not understand unless you were from a rural environment.

5. How has the individual demonstrated leadership in the school community?

Ms. Blount is a quiet giant. She has served on numerous committees at the county and state level, and she has been critical to the immediate community she serves in. She has partnered with the public library to encourage student activity. She has pushed fellow teachers to embrace diversity and increase equity in book selection.

I think she has demonstrated leadership best through her mentoring. For years, she has selected library aides, students who work with her through the school year. Her aides are never the “brightest and best” – but she makes those students exceptional as the year progresses. The trust she puts into her aides, the freedom she gives them to inventory, all build independent skills that her aides use to become successful high school and collegiate women. She has always been a shining example to the aides of someone who grew up and achieved what she wanted. She has been able to enable student dreams because of the faith she puts into her students, mentoring and leading specifically her 6-8 aides every year, giving them tools they will need in order to be successful later.

Professionally, she has led the faculty for years. Her national boards credentials established her knowledge, but her high ethical standard have made her a reliable friend to everyone on the faculty and a trustworthy voice for the right path that should be pursued. She has always been the bright spot we show off to the rest of the world because of her accomplishments and because of her heart. She is never too busy to help someone, never too rushed to help someone with a project, whether student or teachers. This year, she’s leading the English department through setting student goals as the basis for student-led conferences. Last year, she opened the library up to parents and community members for those conferences. This year, she’s working with us to make them even better.