



Nominations for: Kathleen Meulen Ellison

Teacher Librarian
Sonoji Sakai Intermediate School
Bainbridge Island, Wash.

Nominator: Ailene Isaf

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

Kathy Ellison is a SUPERB librarian who builds community, advances learning, supports curiosity and diversity, fosters acceptance, and deepens understanding for the students and staff of Sakai Intermediate School, using technology, community members, and special projects. Through her library, she celebrates our Pacific Northwest environment and cultures with a school-wide salmon project, honors our Island's unique place in our country's history, and provides leadership for a comprehensive anti-bullying program. Kathy has a compelling personal story that inspires and informs her outreach for our Special Education students and those on the margins of our learning community. Kathy is an intellectual learner who loves to teach and get involved. Our library is the hub and the heart of our school, and Kathy Ellison is the heart, the head and the hands of our library.

2. How has the nominee helped you and/or students at school?

Kathy Ellison has been a librarian for 22 years, 7 at Sakai, and she still comes to school every day believing that she has the best job in the school district. She brings huge enthusiasm and a high level of professionalism to special projects that relate to the school culture and environment. Shelley Minor, a sixth grade social studies/language arts teacher, says, "Kathy has the double skills of being able to generate big, wonderful ideas and work out the details, refining and revising to get a project just right. Her energy and commitment to us as teachers and to projects and ideas for the school is boundless."

One project is Sakai's annual "Leaving Our Island" (LOI) project, a first-person history project which honors our Island's Japanese-American citizens, and their unique history during World War II, when they became the first citizens taken to internment camps following the attack on Pearl Harbor. Kathy values her role in helping our community keep this part of our history alive. She has immersed herself in the artifacts and stories of that time, and keeps an archive of important material donated by community members. Our school is named for one of those internees, Sonoji Sakai.

Because 5th and 6th grade students have not yet studied the Second World War, our students are introduced to this historical period through a multi-media presentation prepared by Kathy. Each student chooses an anchor book relating to the internment, and, weeks of study later, the project ends when elder citizens and their families come to Sakai to share their personal experiences of Manzanar with our students in panel discussions.

Kathy's experience was broadened and deepened when she and other teachers joined a trip to Manzanar last Spring with a group of Bainbridge residents who had been interned there during World War II. Shelley Minor, 6th grade social studies and language arts teacher, comments, "Kathy

has always committed herself to our “Leaving Our Island” project. She has guided and expanded student use of primary materials by developing lessons using a local author, Mary Woodward, (In Defense of Our Neighbors), using local history museum collections, and assisting with interviews of our community members who lived through this time. Given her involvement with LOI, it was invaluable to have Kathy come with us on the trip to Manzanar. Her quest for understanding the experience of our community’s elders who had been sent to there during WWII was inspiring. Her insights and impressions from Manzanar generated a wealth of ideas and discussion about how to foster a deeper understanding by our students of our local history and the experience of both the Nissei community and the larger community during this time.”

Another big annual event is “Sakai Reads”, where all our students concurrently read books on a certain theme. For the first year, the theme was tolerance. Kathy created this program as a response to staff and community discussions about our increasingly complex learning community, especially within our Special Education department. She worked with teachers to choose books with quirky characters who “broke the mold”, and celebrated them as heroes of non-conformity. After reading one of the selections, students participated in a small discussion group. These groups were led by 50 parent volunteers. Kelly Greenfield, Sakai’s past PTO Co-President, comments, “These groups allowed students from different grades and classes to mix it up and get into serious debates over the important themes in their novels. Bullying and exclusivity are simply not acceptable in our school, and Kathy’s “Sakai Reads” program really brings these issues to the forefront for students. Community building and acceptance are Kathy’s ultimate objectives.”

For the second year, students read about heroes who showed courage, standing up for what is right even when it is difficult. Since some of the selections cover the Holocaust, Kathy holds a seminar for 5thgrade students to become familiar with the historical aspects of those events. These two themes will now “loop” on a two-year rotation, and Kathy is excited that “Sakai Reads” is becoming a tradition.

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

Kathy makes our school a better place by making curriculum material come alive with fun projects, by making sure all readers get the experience they need, and by making sure all of Sakai’s students feel safe in the library.

Sakai’s library is tailored to the needs of the 5th/6th grade students, with a fiction collection centered around specific genres, and this model works really well for our students. Kathy works collaboratively with other libraries in our school district and with community librarians to supplement our collection with books for lower level readers, Special Education students, and students who need audio support, as well as to find age-appropriate material for our higher-end readers. For example, she put a lunchtime “Classic Books” group together as one approach for advanced readers. Kathy makes sure the materials available span the spectrum of need for our diverse learners.

Kathy’s personal story, and the story of why she became a librarian, is rich and broad, but has one deeply compelling aspect. Kathy’s father is functionally illiterate, most likely due to an undiagnosed learning disability. Kathy’s parents took her to libraries throughout her childhood and worked hard to instill a love of books and of reading. She knew from an early age that she wanted to be a librarian, in part, so that she could help students like her father become confident readers. Kathy says, “It’s the best feeling when someone starts thinking of themselves as a reader... or at least stops saying that they ‘don’t read.’” And, because going to the library was what their cash-strapped family did for fun, she knew that her library would be a place where learning was a pleasure.

Kathy works hard to make sure that her library is a safe place, where students with special needs can come and feel as secure as our more typical kids. One 5th grade student, a very low reader, was rigidly stuck on a single author, to the exclusion of all others, because the books were at his reading level. Kathy called in all of her resources to get every book that author had written into our library, but eventually there were just no more titles, which triggered serious melt-downs from our student. Gently, patiently, persuasively and encouragingly, Kathy did finally manage to enable that student to accept a second author.

One 6th grader, Hope G., says that she would very much describe herself as a person who does not enjoy reading, but, because Kathy frequently talks with her about books and themes that she might like to try, Hope is almost always reading, and enjoying, a good book.

Because Kathy supports curriculum with fun projects, the raising and releasing of salmon at Sakai is a program that students and parents look forward to every year. A salmon stream runs through our school grounds, and we take full advantage of this to emphasize our unique Pacific Northwest cultures and traditions. We raise chum salmon from eggs in tanks in our school, and release them into our stream. Kathy collaborates with science teachers to enhance their classroom teaching.

Sakai Principal Jim Corsetti, who started our salmon project in 1999, says, "Our Sakai Salmon Release Week really benefits from Kathy's efforts! As much as she loves the library, she loves teaching outdoors as well. Every student in the school gets to release salmon fry into the stream at school. She organizes a week-long celebration that involves 20 classrooms, and many parent volunteers. Kathy makes the whole walk down to the stream special and informative, focusing especially on our Northwest Native American traditions, as well as environmental concerns. She does a lot of storytelling during those walks, and has created a great deal of video footage around the event."

Kathy teaches students to care for a large fish tank outside the library door, holding over 1,500 eggs, and each year collaborates with a special fifth grade class as her "salmon report kids". They monitor the chemistry of the tank, keep it cleaned, and learn the life cycle and environmental needs of salmon throughout this process. Kathy helps them create video clips that explain how the eggs are growing. The videos are then shown on our morning television broadcasts. Kathy says, "I am VERY proud of the fact that every kid in the class gets a chance to be on the broadcast in some way."

Kathy also helps students fill and place "salmon condos" in the stream, where salmon hatch and develop right in the stream. We raise about 10,000 chum fry in this way directly in the stream.

In 2012, the City released a report that the watershed into which our stream flows had some of the worst water quality on our Island. Kathy and our principal immediately contacted the City to ask how Sakai could help improve conditions in the stream. Working together with other local educational and environmental groups, the Murden Cove Watershed Nutrient and Bacteria Reduction project was launched. A \$31,000 grant from 3M provided funds for high-tech water testing equipment, and Sakai became one of seven testing sites within the watershed. Kathy celebrates the transformation of our students to citizen scientists. More information on the project can be found here:

<http://mag.bainbridgeisland.com/publication/?i=174167>

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

Our librarian supports individual students and the learning process by making sure students get a good start as library users, getting them the resources they need, inspiring them to read, and by integrating technology into the library experience.

Our library is comparatively small, with about 9,500 items, yet it circulated over 18,000 times last year. Kathy regularly uses our morning television broadcast to give book talks. She has set a reading goal of 10,000 books per year and we have surpassed that the last six years. For a school of only 500 5/6th students, the Accelerated Reader company has named this as one of their greatest successes.

Every year our fifth graders do a “Bootcamp” with Kathy. Each class spends one entire day in the library, during which she teaches them some initial library skills, as well as talking about what makes our school special. She works to give them some life lessons about how to be more reflective about the technology in their life -- learning how to better filter the internet, and knowing what information to keep private on the Web.

Margot Amestoy, Title I/LAP teacher, says, “I could not possibly get my Title I/Lap Program up and running without the incredible support of Kathy. We collaborate and then she goes out of her way to make sure all I have all the necessary test results in a format that is easy to manage. Throughout the school year she supports my students in a myriad of ways. Kathy works with my students one on one to find independent reading books and even purchases books to meet an individual child's needs. She is a tireless and enthusiastic proponent of reading. Kathy and her library are the heart of Sakai.”

Sakai has a reputation for seamlessly integrating technology and instruction, thanks in part to Kathy's willingness to share her expertise. Kathy says, “I love the challenge of helping teachers teach better with technology, and have helped teachers understand their SmartBoards, integrate clickers into their classroom, use online programs to help teach students to write (Essay Scorer), and make their classroom web pages more interactive.” Other recent introductions are sheltered social networking, a special class for 6th graders called “Digital Life”, which gives them guidelines for protecting their online reputations, and the piloting of informational text e-books.

Doug Olson, science teacher, comments, “There is no curriculum in our school she does not know about, and has offered to assist the teacher with links to websites on the Library home page.”

Bob Nash, Technology Paraeducator, adds, "Kathy is the ‘go to’ person for all technology based software and for integrating technology and educational programs. She has been the driving force at Sakai in using Moodle for allowing teachers to directly communicate online with parents and students. This allows parents to view homework, project status and student performance on a real-time basis. Her infectious enthusiasm for pairing technology and education has been invaluable in Sakai becoming a state leader in technology use in the classroom."

Kathy says, “A lot of this can't happen without our fully flexible schedule, which sets us apart from a lot of other libraries serving students at this age level. This allows me to help out with more project-based learning, as well as still give book talks and do book check outs.”

Doug Olson was a member of the design team when our school was being conceived. He says, “In 1998, the design committee for Sakai strategically placed the library at the entrance to our school.

All the school's classroom pods, administration and technology resources were arranged around it. It was the vision of this design committee to make the library an integral part to classroom learning, teacher training/curriculum planning and building goals."

"Kathy Ellison took this vision statement and has successfully made it the practiced mission statement for our school. The library has become the heart and soul of the rhythm for school success for students, teachers, community and administration. The best practices and most effective learning tools are often shared with staff in our library. She rotates classes through the library or computer room to give them online research skills and resources for their unit of study. Kathy provides training for all teachers in the new technologies available for teacher productivity and student learning. Kathy has coordinated a broad spectrum of community volunteers and experts to come help classroom teachers with grade level projects. When teachers sit down to plan units, design communication technology for students and/or parents, Kathy is often involved. "

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

Kathy contributes leadership to our learning community in so many ways. She leads in communication for our anti-bullying curriculum, was a charter member of our Diverse Learners Committee, sits on our Sakai Cabinet, is a member of the District technology advisory committee, helped establish a major community environmental project, and presents regularly to the school Site Council.

For the 2010-2011 school year, Sakai introduced a whole-school anti-bullying curriculum. Kathy, working together with our school counselor, produces and publishes weekly curriculum guides and interactive SmartBoard slides for staff, in both print and electronic form. This resource creation helps the classroom teachers present a unified message each week and takes the weight of designing new curriculum off the plate of the teachers. Kathy takes true leadership in working with the staff to make sure these lessons are on time and in formats that meet the teaching styles of our staff.

Kathy is Sakai's computer coordinator for the District's Tech Advisory Committee, and collaborates to plan our school's technology vision into the future, and trains our staff to use technology effectively.

As a member of the Diverse Learner's Committee, Kathy collaborates with staff to put specific plans in place for addressing the needs of individual students. These plans include creating and providing content for specialized "book clubs" that focus on graphic novels and easy-to-read "Reader's Theater."

Terry Atkinson, 6th grade math/language arts teacher, comments, "Last spring as we were bringing our school year to a close, Kathy invited certificated staff members to meet and collaborate about a vision for our school. She formed a class called, 'What Makes Sakai, Sakai?' We brainstormed/shared ideas and danced around the "what ifs". When we met for our last session, we listed out all the things we do here at Sakai. It was a powerful reminder of what we do well and what we can improve. As a result, some of our improvements and new ideas have already been put into action."

Ruth Schmidt, 6th grade social studies/language arts teacher, agrees that the class was powerful. "Kathy gave us the structure in which to celebrate what we do well, reflect on what we could improve, and provided us with the leadership to have an impact on our school culture and climate." Both Terry and Ruth say that the class was made even more meaningful because it happened at the end of a long and difficult period of discussion about budget cuts and staff changes. The group was

energized by the chance to spend time in a truly reflective piece of work. The summation of all the positive programs was a great way to end the year.

Professionally, Kathy reviews for School Library Journal and writes the "Electronic Eye" column for "Voice of Youth Advocates" (VOYA). The column focuses on electronic resources and trends in library technology. VOYA is a national professional journal for young adult librarians.

Kathy is indeed the heart of our library. But, as a school community, we came to discover just exactly how much we treasure Kathy's leadership when we almost lost her at the end of the 2010/11 school year. The School District committee tasked to balance our budget came perilously close to cutting Kathy's job. It speaks of Kathy's character that, in the face of losing her job, she sent out an email that said "If I am going out, I want to go out with a bang." The email listed a large number of classes for staff that she wanted to cram in before the end of the year. When asked about this, she said, "I just wanted to reclaim the fun in my job, because I have the best job in the District."

Kathy's position has been named as a possible cut in every subsequent budget round, and every year, the school community rallies to save her as an essential element of our learning program. Bainbridge Schools Foundation, our local school support team, raises significant sums of money that contribute to keeping quality librarian services.

"Essential" is exactly the word that defines our librarian. There is no aspect of our school's life that does not have her handprint on it. Sakai "Loves Our Librarian", and we wholeheartedly submit this nomination for her to be an award winner.