



# PRESENTS THE TEACHER OF THE MONTH



## Cortney Pankonien Educator lives what she teaches, teaches what she lives.

When Cortney Pankonien set off for college, determined to be a teacher, she knew nothing could stop her. She proved it to herself - and the everyone who knows her - when she was involved in a serious car accident just three days before classes started. Injuries left her wheelchair-bound. "I got out of the hospital in November, and started classes the next semester," Mrs. Pankonien says.

"When I had my accident, my parents said, 'You're not going to not do anything,' and they changed their own schedules to accommodate my school schedule," Mrs. Pankonien says.

As a result, Mrs. Pankonien says she learned to believe in herself. "My kids know I believe in myself, and they know I believe in them."

Before she even completed her studies at Texas A&M Commerce, she was hired to teach third grade at Ida Handley Elementary. She started in August 2002, and has been there ever since.

Mrs. Pankonien says it was her own third-grade teacher who inspired her to enter the teaching field.

"I really looked up to her. She allowed us to be 'us.' We had discussions with her, and we could talk to her about anything. She still had rules and discipline, but she was also challenging. She had high expectations for us."

Those teaching standards guide Mrs. Pankonien in her career.

"I loved how she treated us all the same, yet still as individuals. No matter what a student's home situation might be, she still maintained those high expectations."

Mrs. Pankonien's unwitting mentor taught her well. Expecting the best of her students has resulted in Mrs. Pankonien's class achieving a 100-percent passing rate on the TAKS test.

"I work really hard with my students all year, even before and after school," she says. By relying on special "teacher tricks" to alleviate their anxiety over the all-important TAKS, Mrs. Pankonien helps them get through the testing periods.

"I send each one home with a good-luck shamrock the night before the test, I tape shamrocks to the floor so they can rub their feet on them when they come into the room, and I sprinkle 'magic dust' under their desks," she says. "I tell them if they get tired of taking the test, or discouraged, they can just rub their feet in the magic dust. I see them rubbing their feet on the floor during the test all the time."

Mrs. Pankonien relies on more than just tricks to get her students through these high-pressure times. "I tell them that their attitude about a test is 50 percent of their success on the test." That positive philosophy has helped her students meet the challenge, she says.

She plans to continue inspiring third graders at Handley Elementary for years to come. "I can't imagine being anywhere else. Everybody here is like a family. And I absolutely love teaching third grade. The kids are a little more independent at this age, and I enjoy watching them grow. I've had kids who start the year hardly being able to read a sentence, and by the end of the year they can read an entire paragraph aloud without any mistakes. Seeing that growth is so important."



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