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Special thanks

Teacher fulfills dream of meeting Oprah Winfrey

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It's not every day you get to meet your idol, and it's definitely not often you get an opportunity to thank them for how they have truly inspired you throughout your life. For former physical education teacher at the Fredonia Central High School Ann LaDuca, that dream was fulfilled recently during a trip to Chicago.

For years, LaDuca utilized the topics and experts found on "The Oprah Winfrey Show" as part of her physical education class.

"What I started to do, probably 15 years ago before the state education department told us that physical education had to incorporate health and lifelong skills into the program, I started to get questions from the girls in the high school level," LaDuca, a teacher in the district for 32 years, said. "I thought, I don't have the answer to these things - anything from teen pregnancy to bullying - so because of the questions I knew there was a need in the high school to supplement, not only physically, what I was doing with them, but educating them about their bodies, their mind and their souls."

A Friday program began which brought girls to the lecture hall where discussion about some of the toughest topics every high school girl should know about began.

"Things from binge drinking, bullying, date rape ... just wonderful subjects, and nutrition of course, and she (Oprah) provided all of the experts," LaDuca said. "Sometimes we'd watch the show and sometimes I would just take notes like a maniac, and sometimes we'd show a clip. So much knowledge and so much after the program ... they were my hardest teaching days of all time.

"Ann used her special Friday class to help teach young girls how to become successful young ladies," said Fredonia Central School superintendent Paul DiFonzo. "She was very sensitive to their particular needs, and she used this class as a vehicle to help students understand and deal with the physical, emotional and social changes that they were experiencing as young adults. She gave these female students a safe haven to discuss their individual needs and concerns in a caring and friendly environment."

The program, which according to LaDuca began before the state mandated a sort of body and mind wellness curriculum for students, was directly inspired by Oprah and her show.

"She was absolutely, she committed her last years on the air to women and girls," LaDuca said. "I was watching them religiously .. I had watched them 25 years ago, but I started seeing subjects with professionals, the best in the world coming to speak on these things and I thought I could definitely incorporate these in my classes."

After long last the opportunity to present a formal thank you to the one who inspired the program that touched thousands of high school students in the Fredonia Central School District presented itself.

Ann's sister, Mary Lancaster, was presented with tickets to the Oprah Winfrey Show from a former Fredonia High School student who now owns The Pond restaurant in Chicago. Knowing for years how Ann used Oprah's program in the classroom, Mary asked her to come.

"When we got to the show there is a lady who warms up the audience - asking who came the farthest, who had a birthday, and anything anyone else wanted to say," LaDuca said. "I raised my hand, stood up, and I said I have always wanted to thank Oprah personally for brining the show to me and that I was so

Article Photos



Submitted photo
Ann LaDuca, right, of Fredonia and her
sister, Mary Lancaster, in Chicago for
"The Oprah Winfrey Show" in April.

inspired by everything she's ever brought in and little does she know but a little school in western New York has taught hundreds if not thousands of girls through her show."

The woman warming up the audience told LaDuca they would love for her to be taped for the show. So after the program aired she followed across the street to another studio where she and her sister were interviewed as part of the Oprah Winfrey Show on Oprah Radio.

"We sat there with big headphones on and a microphone and the woman that was interviewing us was in another room and she just talked to us and just let us chatter on. She said we did real good, but she said she can't promise when it will be on, if it will be on," LaDuca said. "I said I just always wanted to thank her, but didn't expect Oprah to ever here it, and the woman said Oprah listens to every single one of these, so I was really excited. It was such a dream come true."

Since returning from the show in late April, Ann has been able to let a few of her past students know that she has finally met the one who helped drive their instruction for so many years.

"I was at Tops last week and I was talking to Julie who works there and she was an old student and I told her I finally got to meet Oprah and she just burst into tears," she said. "And then I was in Bargain Outlet and I told another old student and she said 'Mrs. LaDuca, I can't believe it!' I've had students who had written in to try and get me on or at least let Oprah know what we've been doing."

"The young ladies could always rely on Mrs. LaDuca for excellent advice and support during challenging times," DiFonzo said. "Ann still works as a substitute in our district, which is not surprising, because she loves teaching children and having positive interactions with the staff and community. ann is a very special person."

To view the archived audio recordings from the Oprah Winfrey radio show in hopes of finding the interview with Ann visit www.oprah.com/oprahradio/about-the-oprah-winfrey-show-on-oprah-radio

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