

Caravans of caring



JIMMY LAROU/SUFFOLK NEWS-HERALD

Beth Whitworth, an Early Start teacher at Florence Bowser Elementary School, decorated her car before she and much of the school's staff set out on a parade Tuesday afternoon to greet their students and parents. That followed Gov. Ralph Northam's announcement that schools would stay closed for the year in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. Principal Melodie Griffin said staff members have already approached her about doing another parade before the end of the school year.

Parades help mend broken hearts

BY JIMMY LAROU AND ALEX PERRY
STAFF WRITERS

Just the thought of seeing their students again was enough to bring smiles to Florence Bowser Elementary School teachers Tuesday as they decorated their cars with greetings before setting out to

see them.

With the news that Gov. Ralph Northam would keep schools closed for the remainder of the academic year due to the coronavirus pandemic, spirits had been deflated, as they had to come to terms with not being able to see them again at school.

But as they gathered in the parking lot at John F. Kennedy Middle School to begin the caravan, teachers amiably decorated their cars, doing their best to stay a safe distance away from one another.

"I miss your hugs and your smiles," read the message on the car of Florence Bowser

Principal Melodie Griffin, who said the caravan among the neighborhoods, which began at 2 p.m. and was still going on three hours later, was a big boost to both her staff and the children.

"It was amazing to see at 5

See **PARADES, 5**



ALEX PERRY/SUFFOLK NEWS-HERALD

Families wave at Kilby Shores Elementary School staff members as they drive past the intersection of Brian's Lane and Elmore Circle Tuesday afternoon.

Parades: Teachers wave to students during procession

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p.m. parents and students were still waiting for us to reach their neighborhood," Griffin said.

It was a scene that made Griffin cry. "I always knew I had an amazing staff family, but today proved it," Griffin said. "I was literally brought to tears seeing everyone uniting together today via our cars to support our students and their families."

As she decorated her car, Beth Whitworth, an Early Start teacher at Florence Bowser, was looking forward to seeing some of her students again. Though she uses the program Class Dojo to message and post videos to them, it's not the same as being in class with her students.

"We're missing our babies at school," Whitworth said, her voice breaking as she spoke. "And we just wanted them to know we're thinking about them, so we're car-avanning together to show them all of our love and support."

Staff members in nearly three dozen cars drove through the Hollywood, Jericho and other neighborhoods to wave hello and honk horns as students and parents waved back and smiled from their yards and front porches. One man watching likened the honking and waving to a wedding procession.

Even as the parade was still going on, Griffin and other Florence Bowser teachers were receiving messages about how much they appreciated the parade. Many said they cried seeing the parade of teachers and staff.

"We are saddened that we won't be back at FBES this year," said one email to Griffin. "The parade helped the boys a lot. ... It's been a tough week since the governor's announcement and this really brightened our week."

Said another, in part: "My kids felt like they were not forgotten today." Kilby Shores

Elementary had its own motorcade of Sharks Tuesday, as more than 30 vehicles with teachers and staff rode through about 10 different neighborhoods near the school to wave at students, according to Principal Lorri Banks.

Standing on their front lawns, students and their parents were excited to see their Kilby Shores teachers again.

Banks and her staff members chose Tuesday for the sunny weather and notified parents about the parade ahead of time. They were welcomed with cheers from school families in each neighborhood they slowly navigated.

"It was a great reception," Banks said. "The parents and the students seemed very excited about it. They have been posting online about how nice it was, and how they appreciated the staff members coming through."

Some staff members brought their children along for the ride, as well as some adorable mutts. Bryan Bonner, the school security monitor, played music from his vehicle as the parade's impromptu DJ.

Marcus Johnson has three children who attend Kilby Shores — "all the teachers know them as the Johnson kids," he said — and his kids were excited to get out of the house to see their teachers drive down the street.

"They were really excited. They've been cooped up in the house, (and) with the weather I haven't really been able to take them to the park or anything, so this was something they really enjoyed," Johnson said.

He said it was neat seeing how much the Kilby Shores staff members really care about their students, and many staff members brought hand-made signs on Tuesday to let the students know how much they mean to them.

Allison Greene, library media specialist at Kilby Shores, made a sign to remind the students to

read for at least 20 minutes each day.

"It's just nice to be able to get together one more time and do something for the kids, even if it's just driving through their neighborhoods and waving to them," Greene said.

With the school year ending prematurely, Greene said it was an exciting opportunity to see one another again.

"We were all devastated by the news (Monday) that school was going to be closed for the rest of the year, and we just wanted to see our kids," Greene said. "We didn't get a chance to say goodbye. We wanted a chance to at least see them (and) tell them that we still care. We miss them and we love them."

Joshua Cheaney, 10, a fourth-grade student at Florence Bowser who shares the same name as his father, was standing outside on the corner of Hollywood and Georgia avenues with his mother, Amy Cheaney, looking forward to seeing the caravan. He, too, wanted another chance to see his teacher, Priscilla Prince.

He had a sign ready for her. It had both their names on it.

And off to the side, a little note:

"Thank you Mrs. Prince for being the best teacher of 4th grade. $11 \times 11 = 121$."

Joshua was grateful to see his teacher, since he didn't know if he'd get that chance. When he learned Monday that he wouldn't get to go back for the rest of the school year, "my heart just went down." So it was a boost to see them a day later.

Teachers shared a similar feeling.

"I got choked up when I heard the governor say it was closed for the remainder of the year," Whitworth said. "That immediately brought tears to my eyes. It's hard, just trying to figure things out."

Kindergarten teacher Taylor Flick, who brought her golden retriever Cali with her,

said the news hit her hard. "I still feel like I'm in a daze," Flick said. "Like it's not real, like it's a dream and I'm waiting to wake up from it."

Flick has been using the Seesaw app to communicate with students and do digital activities. She said the videos they've exchanged with her have touched her. "They're telling me how much they miss me," Flick said. "They're showing me their cats and their dogs, and all of their family members, then showing me the work they've been doing. It's just been an awesome opportunity to be able to still see them, but I miss them tremendously. I miss being in school and having them around."

But seeing each other brought smiles from staff members inside their cars, and from children and parents waving back at them.

"Today was a good day," Joshua said. "Ever since my mom told me that the parade was going to happen, I've been excited for this day, and I was happy that I finally got to see my teacher."

Though her son is doing the work sent home, he misses his teachers and friends.

"He's always giving hugs," Amy Cheaney said, "always trying to do what the teacher says to do, basically, like a teacher's pet."

She was concerned about what he would be doing during the time away from school, and how she would help him, but Prince has been staying in touch with him and all of her students, and he picks a time each day to complete his schoolwork.

"I've got to do what I've got to do to make sure he stays where he needs to stay," Amy Cheaney said.

Before he went back inside his house, Joshua had one last thing to say:

"Shout out to Florence Bowser, best school in the world."