

Grand Forks Central honors long-time employee, Marsha Ketring, on her retirement after 56 years in school's office

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Long-time Grand Forks Central High School office manager Marsha Ketring reacts as faculty, staff and alumni of Grand Forks Central applaud her during a celebration on the front lawn of the school on Wednesday, July 15. Ketring recently announced her retirement after 56 years. Eric Hylden / Grand Forks Herald

Marsha Ketring was 18 years old, just out of Aaker's Business College with a business education degree, when she began working in the principal's office on July 15, 1964, at Grand Forks Central High School.

On Wednesday, July 15, on the school's front lawn, she was honored at an event marking her retirement after 56 years. In its 138-year history, Grand Forks Central has had 16 principals. Ketring has worked with eight of them.

"I loved the job because I did a variety of things, and I loved the people," said Ketring, who served as office manager. "I need to be busy, so I don't know how it's going to work at home, but we'll see."

She remembers all the principals with whom she worked, she said. "They were all neat," she said. Many at the gathering said she "trained" them.

The event was filled with shared stories and memories of a woman who grew up on a farm near Fisher, Minn., and is the employee with the longest tenure in the school, and possibly in the district, said Principal Jon Strandell.

But it's her kindness, patience and helpfulness that many in the crowd wanted to recognize. "She's done so much for me over the years," said Trevor Lennon, who's completed his sixth year as business education teacher at the school. "It won't be the same without her. "She's one of the nicest people in the world. If you ever have any questions, she knows -- or if she doesn't know, she'll know who to contact," he said.

As leader of the school Future Business Leaders of America chapter, Lennon had some difficulty making financial records match, he said, and Ketring spent three hours figuring out where it was wrong. Kim Clark, retired marketing teacher who ran the school's store, said Ketring "has the patience of a saint." "Marsha was always on top of it," Clark said of oft-changing rules on financial record-keeping. "She's a godsend. She's a legend." "I'm sure I gave (Ketring) some headaches. But she never got upset, no matter what," Leonard Kjelland, who took over Clark's role as marketing teacher, said. "She's always happy, always smiling," Lennon said. "And she brought the best apple dessert, with caramel drizzle, on her birthday," Clark said. "You weren't gone (from work) that day."

'Feels like a family'

During the formal program, several guest speakers praised Ketring for the kindness, compassion, patience and positivity she exhibited daily -- traits that endeared her to students, teachers, staff members, administrators and visitors to the school.

Strandell spoke about the family atmosphere that permeates Central. "The place feels like a family," he said. "That word is indescribable. And it's used often in society (to describe organizations), but I look at that with skepticism -- I'm not sure that's the case." But at Central, there's a feeling when you walk in the door, according to Strandell.

"We have Mother. We have a mother figure. I wonder if she knows the impact she's had over 56 years, the influence she's had on students based on her interactions with them on a daily basis."

Strandell cited the thousands of students she's impacted with "her warmth, her kindness, her patience, her caring -- that is Marsha Ketring," he said.

Her example "makes us look in the mirror and ask, 'How do we interact with others, with students and adults?' Hopefully, we've taken that trait and are passing it on to students here every day," he said.

Strandell and his several assistant and associate principals make up a group Ketring calls "The Boys," he said. "At the end of the day, she'd say, 'Goodnight, boys.' "

‘Best years of my career’

A former principal, Jeff Schatz, was on hand to laud Ketring for her part in making his 15 years in Grand Forks Central administration “the best years of my career, hands down.” He recognized Ketring for adapting to new computer technologies he introduced to the office. “She never blinked an eye,” said Schatz, describing her as a trusted confidante.

“Nobody is more trustworthy than Marsha Ketring,” he said. “You were always honest with me. I appreciate it. “I’ve always thought of you, everywhere I’ve gone, and the impact you’ve had on my life,” Schatz said, “and how you’ve made me better.”

Another speaker, Associate Principal Gabe Dahl, said Ketring is well-known for building relationships. “She takes the time to say hello and make connections. She talks with every person as though they were the most important person in the world,” he said. “No matter what kind of day you’re having, you see Marsha and her smile, and you walk away and your heart feels a lot better.”

Retired Principal Buck Kasowski, who could not attend in person, sent an audio message, thanking Ketring for her “kindness, compassion and consistency.” “It’s most important to have empathy. The students knew you cared about them,” he said.

Based on their years of working together, Kasowski said: “I know a few things about you. I know that you are not enjoying all the attention, and that you’d rather sneak out the back door. I also know you are a doer, you have to get out and do things. I know you’ll get out and help your community and your family.”

In congratulating her on her retirement, he said: “You are the epitome of what we stand for at Grand Forks Central. You have been the role model, the leader for many, many, many years.”

After the program, Larry Barker, who retired in 1997 after 29 years as a history teacher at Central, joked with her, recalling the time he commented that a dress she wore to work “looked like a drape.” “I never wore that dress again,” she laughed. “We kidded each other a lot,” Barker said.

Mark Sanford, retired superintendent for Grand Forks Public Schools, spoke with her after the ceremony. “You’ve been such a wonderful example for everybody,” Sanford said. “Traditions are about relationships.”

In typical Scandinavian, Lutheran modesty, Ketring downplayed her impact on those whose lives she has touched. “I try to treat everybody like I’d like to be treated,” she said.