

WOODLAND HEIGHTS CUSTODIAN TEACHES STUDENTS THAT KINDNESS COUNTS

- By ADAM DRAPCHO, THE LACONIA DAILY SUN
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Ben Phillips, who has been a custodian at Woodland Heights Elementary School for 25 years, was honored on Friday for exemplifying kindness. (Adam Drapcho/The Laconia Daily Sun)



Ben Phillips and Bob Hamel have worked together on Christmas Village for more than 20 years. On Friday, Phillips was honored at Woodland Heights School, where he works as a custodian, for being an example of kindness. (Adam Drapcho/The Laconia Daily Sun)

LACONIA — Each school has its official leaders, its administrators and veteran teachers. But many schools also have people whose importance outstrips their job description. At Woodland Heights Elementary School on Friday, one of those unofficial leaders was recognized before a schoolwide assembly held to underscore the year’s theme of “kindness counts.”

Ben Phillips, one of the day custodians at the school, is someone who greets every student with a smile, said Eric Johnson, the school’s principal.

“He’s a very kind guy,” Johnson said. “Kids with challenges, he relates with naturally. He wants to talk with them, see how they’re doing.”

Phillips, who has Down’s syndrome, started working at the school 25 years ago, and has since ingrained himself into the character of the school.

“He’s just one of those good guys. He comes in, smiles, he really connects with the kids. He’s a part of Woodland Heights,” Johnson said.

The assembly featured Mayor Ed Engler, City Councilor Bob Hamel, City Manager Scott Myers, school board members, and the heads of the city’s departments. Hamel, who is one of the organizers behind the Laconia Christmas Village, said Phillips has been volunteering with the annual holiday celebration for at least the past 20 years, greeting happy children who come to explore the North Pole and visit with Santa Claus.

This past Christmas Village, Phillips’ tenure earned him the title of Mayor of Christmas Village. At the assembly, Hamel presented Phillips with framed photographs of Phillips presiding over the village.

Phillips first came to Woodland Heights School in 1994, as an intern placed by Easter Seals. Bob Champlin, who was principal at the time, said he soon realized Phillips should be hired as a long-term employee.

“Every day I came in, I knew I could count on him. He came in with a smile, he worked every day for you guys,” Champlin told the assembly.

“When I think of kindness, I think of Mr. Ben,” Johnson told the students. “If anything, be kind.”

Kindness comes easy

As students returned to their classrooms immediately after the assembly, Phillips said the surprise honor made him, “So happy. I didn’t mean to cry.”

He said he doesn't have to try hard to be kind.

"No, it's really easy. I started when I was a young kid, until now," he said.

He said he enjoys coming to work at Woodland Heights: "I love working here. I can see the kids, have fun with the kids." He's been there long enough that he's starting to see the children of people he met when they were students. "I am so glad that I am well-loved here. It is my favorite school ever. I'm glad that the kids can learn from me."