

A lifelong impact

Former Sturgis teacher is one common thread between 3 local award winners



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From left, Cathie Anderson, Becky Sukstorf, Ramona Britton Saubers, and Dede Long recently met for lunch to celebrate Saubers, who taught all three in kindergarten and high school in Sturgis. During the past school year, Anderson received the Meade School District Teacher of the Year award; Sukstorf received the Spearfish Middle School Teacher of the Year award; and Long received the Meade School District Professional Technical Support Staff member of the Year award. The three said these recognitions reflect on Saubers' impact. Pioneer photo by Kaija Swisher

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By Kaija Swisher Black Hills Pioneer

SPEARFISH — Sitting around a table at Roma's Ristorante in Spearfish, four smartly-dressed ladies laugh and reminisce about life. It's not immediately evident that the group is a reflection of a former kindergarten teacher and three of her students — each of whom received an award during the school year for their work. The three said these awards reflect on the impact of their first teacher, Mrs. Ramona Britton Saubers.

“(It’s) Our highest compliment we could give you,” Dede Long said.

Long recently retired from the Meade School District, but not before receiving the Meade School District Professional Technical Support Staff member of the Year award. Her

close friends since kindergarten, Cathie Anderson and Becky Sukstorf, both teach middle school English; Anderson received the Meade School District 2015 Teacher of the Year award and Sukstorf received the Spearfish Middle School 2015 Teacher of the Year award.

To celebrate these honors and recognize the impact of their first teacher, the three friends planned a day to take Saubers out for lunch after getting together for a tour of her home on Junction Avenue, where she taught kindergarten classes in Sturgis before they were offered through the public school.

“She is an amazing person and was a wonderful teacher and mentor for so many,” Sukstorf said.

Saubers received her bachelor’s degree at Black Hills State Teachers College and then taught for three years in Vale and one year in Wyoming before starting a kindergarten in her home in Sturgis in 1962. At the same time, she approached then Black Hills State Teachers College President Dr. Russell Jonas to ask if the college could teach something to prepare educators to teach kindergarten. He told her that if she could get six people who were interested, the college would offer a course specific to the teaching of kindergarten. Saubers said it wasn’t hard to find six people interested, as many teachers wanted kindergarten training, and the class began that summer. She also earned her master’s degree in education with an emphasis in English through Black Hills State, taking classes after she finished teaching kindergarten at noon, as well as during the summers. She also received grants in the summer to study at the University of Colorado-Boulder, Lehigh University in Pennsylvania, and Columbia University in New York, receiving credits for her master’s degree, which allowed her to see different educational philosophies and perspectives.

When asked if she had always wanted to be a teacher, Saubers said, “No, I wanted to be a movie star. That’s not a joke! I have it in my second-grade autograph book. That’s what I want to be.”

“Thank goodness for us it didn’t work out!” Anderson joked, speaking for Saubers’ students.

Saubers explained that going into education was the logical thing to do at the time to do, since the options for women were more limited. But it ended up being more than just a logical choice.

“I loved it,” she said, explaining that she gets tears in her eyes when thinking of the wonderful memories from her years of teaching.

The kindergarten would begin in the morning and last until noon, and Saubers’ classes ranged in size from 20-25, 4- and 5-year-olds. She used the dining room as the classroom and bought all of the kindergarten equipment from St. Martin’s Academy. Her living

room was the music room; the kitchen was the craft room; and the yard outside was great for a play area.

Sukstorf remembers the sitting on the porch swing, singing songs, baking cookies, and always feeling that Saubers brought the lessons to life.

“You were more than just a teacher,” she said.

“She just always made it fun, and just relaxing,” Sukstorf added. “I didn’t ever feel any tension. It was just a relaxed atmosphere. That’s probably helped me the most; that’s when kids learn. You can’t learn if you’re afraid, and you can’t learn if you’re tense. You have to be comfortable.”

“Along with learning, she’s a nurturer, and taught us to do that as well, because all three of us are,” Long added.

Three years after Saubers opened her kindergarten, the Sturgis public schools began offering kindergarten, so she moved to the high school to teach English. Many of her students — including Anderson, Long, and Sukstorf — spent time in her classroom again as teenagers.

They distinctly remember her Shakespeare unit and can still recite lines from *Macbeth*. When the school bell would ring, students would quote, “Hear it not, Duncan, for it is a knell / That summons thee to heaven or to hell,” and they also remember when Saubers took her classes to the movie theater to watch Roman Polanski’s 1971 film version of “*Macbeth*.”

“I swore the class to secrecy because illogically, Lady Macbeth sleepwalks in the nude ... so I told the students, ‘You have to promise to close your eyes when this scene comes on; otherwise, I’m going to be in trouble,’” Saubers said. She added that she didn’t tell them Lady Macbeth was in the nude; she just told them the character was “barefoot all over.”

Another of her favorite memories that still makes her laugh whenever she thinks about it had to do with an essay regarding Jackson Hole, Wyo., which was originally called Jackson’s Hole. The essay was a description of the place, and she asked one of the boys in her class to read it.

“He said, ‘As we rounded the hill, we were looking down into Jackson’s Hole,’ and of course, they started to laugh, and I said, ‘Boys, that’s not funny,’ but of course it was,” Saubers recounted. “It was so funny I couldn’t quit laughing.”

She finally had to leave the room to get rid of the giggles.

It was the students who were her favorite part of teaching.

“The kids — the back and forth, the give and take, the love,” she said of the best parts of teaching. Saubers’ hope for her students was that they would feel secure, enjoy learning, and be the best they can, whatever they choose to do.

Her former students couldn’t recall classroom management being an issue in Saubers’ classroom.

“You did have everyone’s respect,” Long said. “We looked forward to that class.”

The educators acknowledge that things have changed since those days. Saubers remembers one day when she was walking through a school corridor, and a high school boy used an expletive. When he noticed her, he said, “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t know you were there.”

The respect the students had for her was a direct result of the way she treated them. Anderson said that the students could always feel Saubers’ passion and the “extra mile” she was willing to go for them.

“It didn’t matter what your background, she loved you,” Long added.

Saubers said that it is a joy to see her former students be successful, and she doesn’t give herself credit for it.

“It’s really nice that you’ve got memories, and I do, too,” she told her former students.

Saubers retired in 1989, and her advice to future teachers is, “Be sure you love the students.”

Since retiring, Saubers has kept busy. She is involved in two bridge clubs, a book club, and church groups, and she enjoys embroidery, antiques, crossword puzzles, and more. And like the current lunch date, she enjoys catching up with her former students. They may be taller than she remembers from kindergarten, or spend their days differently than they did in high school, but most of the time, she recognizes the adults who approach and ask if she remembers them.

“I even remember where they sat,” Saubers added.