

sustaining a spark

INSPIRING THE NEXT GENERATION,
ONE SCIENCE CLASS AT A TIME

BY LEAH BERRY | PHOTO BY JOHN MICHAEL SIMPSON

Denise O’Gorman has loved science and math since high school, and was inspired to pursue a degree in education by two of her teachers. “I wanted to be that [role model] for younger generations,” she says.

A transplant from New York, Denise comes from a family of six children – three of whom are also teachers. She was taught to value education and has lived into those values by building a career at **Woods Charter School** over the past 21 years. Initially a part-time test administrator for Woods, Denise began teaching full-time once her three daughters got older. She started out as a biology teacher, but now teaches earth and environmental science, AP environmental science and marine biology.

Denise has since made a considerable impact at Woods. She started a three-day trip to the Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont in Tennessee to provide juniors a hands-on bonding experience in nature. This year marks her 15th leading the trip, an experience that students look forward to and even mention in their graduation speeches.

Last year, Denise worked with Woods teachers **Eryn Dillard** and **Jessica Walden-Gray** to request a “Go Outside Grant” from the North Carolina Youth Outdoor Engagement Commission for the purpose of transforming a retention pond on the school’s property into an outside learning space. With the

\$15,000 grant and another \$3,000 she was able to fundraise, the new learning center will be completely paid for. “I’m here for the kids,” Denise says. “I enjoy inspiring students, I enjoy the camaraderie I have with them ... it keeps me young.”

Denise is also the most recent recipient of the Environmental Educators NC Outstanding Practitioner Award, which recognizes a member of the Environmental Educators of North Carolina – a nonprofit that represents a network of individuals and organizations who collaborate to strengthen environmental education in our state – who has made significant contributions to the organization through statewide participation, leadership in their region and advocating for high-quality education. “I was really excited,” Denise says. “As an educator, I do a lot, and I do it for the students and not the accolades, but it felt good that other people saw what I was doing.”

Noah Laupert, 17, Alina Handel, 16, and Liam Drake, 16, observe as Denise demonstrates a way to model the effects of greenhouse gas.

“This school is about building relationships with students,” she goes on to say. With 46 students per grade, Denise is able to get to know her students as individuals, something she cherishes about her role. Her favorite course to teach is AP environmental science, because she loves when kids can see that they have the ability to make a difference. “I feel like I’m making an impact for the future,” Denise says. “Our children are our hope for the future.” ►

