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THOMPSON SCHOOL DISTRICT

PHOTOS BY JENNY SPARKS — LOVELAND REPORTER-HERALD

With his service dog, Cosmo by his side, automotive teacher David Desantiago talks Wednesday about his love for teaching students at Thompson Valley High School in Loveland.

Loveland Rotary honors teachers and students

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Gloria Alvarez isn't currently enrolled in David DeSantiago's automotive class at Thompson Valley High School, but that didn't stop her from dropping by the shop on Wednesday to share some exciting news. Thanks to what she learned while taking his class as a junior, Alvarez told the teacher that she was able to get a good deal on a 1991 Chevy Cavalier wagon with only 125,000 miles.

"Those are nice," DeSantiago said excitedly. "I've wanted a Cavalier wagon for a long time. You can get some performance out of those and they look awesome."

Alvarez is one of a handful of girls that have taken DeSantiago's class, which is offered to students across the district as part of its Career and Technical Education (CTE) program. Greatly outnumbered by the boys in the program, Alvarez was shy to start, but quickly emerged as a star student, DeSantiago said.

"She has made enormous strides," he said. "We teamed up to rebuild engines, and this young lady took the lead with her team and just did amazing. In fact, she was the best performing team and the best performing student last year." For her part, Alvarez said that DeSantiago gave her the opportunity to find her own way around the cars and stepped in when the class's gender imbalance became difficult to navigate.

"This class is really good for girls, and he is really good at making us feel comfortable," she said. "He's good at making sure that all the other students respect that, too."

David Desantiago, automotive teacher, gives students some tips before they change the oil in a car Wednesday at Thompson Valley High School in Loveland.

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That ability to find rapport with a wide range of students has earned DeSantiago praise both from those in his class and his bosses at Thompson School District's Career and Technical Education (CTE) program."His passion is there every single day," said Andy Stevens, director of CTE for the district. "He's created what I would describe as a subculture at Thompson Valley High School, where he's got students that seek out the auto shop as a place of safety and engagement in their educational journey."

Earlier this month, it also earned him the coveted "Teacher of the Month" award from Loveland Rotary.

JENNY SPARKS — LOVELAND REPORTER-HERALD

Automotive teacher David Desantiago shows students Nathan Anderson, left, and Stephen Smith, right, how to find the correct sockets in the toolbox Wednesday while preparing to teach students how to change the oil in Nathan's car during class at Thompson Valley High School in Loveland.

'They all work hard'

As a longtime high school math teacher, Dick Bradsby knows that the effort educators put into their students' success often goes unnoticed. Which is why his first order of business after joining the Loveland Rotary in 2005 was to propose a teacher recognition program as a complement to the organization's monthly student achievement award, which dates back to 1982.

"I felt like it's a job that doesn't get too much recognition, for all of the work that they do," said Bradsby. "For someone to say 'thank you,' that's huge for teachers."

Bradsby's proposal was quickly accepted by the Loveland Rotary board, with the condition that he take charge of the initiative, a job he was only too happy to accept.

The student and teacher recognition programs are part of the Rotary's broader commitment to literacy and education, Bradsby said. In addition to these honors, the organization awards annual scholarships and Rotary members serve as reading tutors for local students. In years past, they also distributed dictionaries throughout the district as part of their literacy efforts.

Bradsby and members of the program's subcommittee select the honorees from nominations submitted by TSD administrators or counselors. He said there is no hard and fast criteria, but the Rotary is generally looking for candidates who have overcome adversity to find success.

"They all work hard," Bradsby said. "But we're looking for something personal that makes them stand out a little more."

One student-of-the month honoree that he remembers vividly is Zoe Rollins, a Thompson Valley student who suffered a spinal cord injury in a car accident in 2021.

"She was very inspirational," Bradsby said. "We've had kids that have been homeless, kids living with grandparents because they lost their parents, some of them were in accidents. There's just a gamut of stories"

The Loveland Rotary honors a total of 20 educators and students each school year with a plaque and a $500 check to go toward classroom expenses or future educational needs.

Helping underwrite that is a donation to the Rotary in remembrance of D.R. and Virginia Pulliam, descendants of Loveland's pioneering Pulliam family. In 2006, the family's trust donated enough to keep at least one of the monthly programs going "forever," Bradsby said.

Other private donations and business sponsorships have also helped fund the program.

'I love teaching'

DeSantiago is in his second year of heading up the automotive education program for Thompson Schools, a job he said he got by "accident."

"I applied to be a Spanish teacher," he said, with a chuckle.

The online application asked DeSantiago about other skills and interests, and, on a whim, he clicked "automotive," because, as long as he can remember, he has been tinkering with motors, either on cars, motorcycles or boats.

"The next day I got a call asking if I wanted to interview for the open position in the auto program," he said. "I was floored."

After a successful interview with Stevens, DeSantiago was hired just two days before the 2023-24 school year. Ever since, he has made it his goal to give his students the knowledge and skills they need to make a career in the automotive industry or another skilled trade.

"It opens the door for engineering, physics, science, chemistry and I employ all those disciplines in the classroom," DeSantiago explained. "I use all of that because students will grasp things in ways that other students won't. And so with my raging ADHD, I try to cover all the bases whenever I'm trying to teach something."

Though he wasn't sure what to expect on his new journey in automotive education, DeSantiago said that he has loved every step of it so far.

"I am still trying to figure out the idiosyncrasies of how much to let them in on, or how much to let them learn on their own," he said. "But I love teaching."

That obvious love for the profession is a big part of why Stevens nominated DeSantiago for the Rotary honor, as is his obvious dedication to his students, no matter their path.

"He's just really created a program that ultimately welcomes all students and gives them that safe place to be in their high school experience," Stevens said. "We were fortunate that the Rotary recognized that and was willing to honor David in the way that they did."

DeSantiago said that he was surprised and honored by the Rotary's recognition and will use his award to buy more tools.

'It was a little bit surprising'

As a center defender for Berthoud High's soccer team, senior Cody Goodwin has suffered his share of athletic injuries, including a twice-broken co- llarbone and major concussion.

But through it all he has maintained high academic standards and been a model teammate.

For his resilience in the face of challenges, Goodwin was selected by Loveland Rotary as September's Student of the month.

"I wasn't ever expecting to receive anything like that," Goodwin said of the honor. "It was a little bit surprising."

In the classroom, the senior is an Advanced Placement (AP) scholar who has been on Berthoud's honor roll for three consecutive years.

He is also concurrently enrolled in college-level courses at Front Range Community College.

On the soccer field, Goodwin serves as captain and has emerged as one of the team's strongest leaders, according to his coach, J.J. Johnson.

"Cody blends his competitive spirit and emotional intelligence to make an invaluable player as an asset to the team," Johnson said during the award ceremony.

"Cody's combination of academic excellence, athletic proudness and strong character make him deserving of this award today."

Goodwin plans to put his $500 from the award toward attending college after graduation. Though he hasn't yet decided where that will be, he is hopeful that his soccer skills will help pave the way.