

# She wanted to share: Local teacher is honored with Lewis Award

## NC Catholics

As the oldest of five, she learned early that she enjoyed being around children. Teen years spent babysitting helped affirm that. Later, a bachelor's degree, a certification and a master's degree in science education helped prepare her to teach.

"I wanted to be in the classroom," said Mary Barber, who began her career teaching in public schools and universities. "I wanted to share knowledge and to share love."

But, she said, it never occurred to her to also share her Catholic faith until she read a bulletin during Mass at St. Egbert Church in Morehead City and saw an opportunity for a teaching position at the parish school.

Today she teaches all the core subjects in 5th grade at St. Egbert. And her work, long appreciated by colleagues, parents and students, was recently recognized by the Lewis Award. Barber was named the 2023-2024 recipient of the Monsignor Gerald Lewis Award for Excellence in Teaching. Given annually, the award is the equivalent of teacher of the year for Diocese of Raleigh Catholic Schools.

"This award is unbelievable to me," said Barber. "I was stunned when the bouquet arrived."

The flowers delivered to school are part of the Lewis Award tradition. Each year three finalists are selected from nominations. Next, the committee visits each finalist to observe the teacher in the classroom. Once the recipient is selected, that educator is surprised at school with the announcement and then later honored during Mass and a luncheon.

The award comes with an honorarium, or financial gift, to the recipient and the recipient's school.

Barber's achievement was celebrated April 17 at St. Egbert Church, right where she first read about the teacher job 20 years ago.

During her tenure, she's worked to maintain what she first observed as a culture of excellence at the school.

"There's a sense of faith and sharing that lets you know they care," she said of the community. "There's an expectation that everyone would be a model of their faith ... and there's family support."

At St. Egbert, the 5th graders are the oldest students in the building. To Barber, the 5th graders have a sense of humor, respect for their teacher and desire to do well and that inspires her.

"They find fun and joy in their world, and it helps me to find fun and joy in my world," she said.

One of Barber's most treasured classroom traditions is morning prayer intentions.

It not only lets her know about their lives and what's on their heart that day, but it also models thoughtfulness, she said.

She often reads aloud to the students as they follow along in their books, an exercise that's entertaining for them but also promotes expression, diction, fluency and punctuation. Most recently they delved into the novel *Island of the Blue Dolphins*.

"Instructionally, there's a variety," said principal Denise Leuci of Barber's teaching. "They're reading, writing, working in groups and at the board ... She's consistent and steadfast. She has a great way of fostering expectations, and her students rise to the occasion."

Leuci added that Barber is also known for being a dependable colleague and keeping in touch with alumni.

She often maintains connections with former students by attending their ball games, concerts and weddings when possible. And if she spots an article about them in the newspaper, she's been known to clip it out and send it to them with a note.

"When children come into my classroom ... I belong to them. Forever," Barber smiled.