

Teacher Feature: Denise Disrud & Kathy Kjolhaug, Reading Specialists

“The more things that you read, the more things you will know. The more things that you learn, the more places you’ll go.” - Dr. Seuss



Denise Disrud is in her 16th year at Clearbrook-Gonvick. She began her career here by teaching high school special education for six years. She has been a reading teacher for the past ten years.

Denise grew up on a farm north of Oklee the youngest of seven children. She attended a one-room country school from kindergarten through sixth grade. These were some of the best years of her life. She attended and graduated from Oklee High School. After high school, Denise attended the Thief River Falls Vocational School for accounting. She got married and lived in the Crookston area for 25 years. After her daughters were in school, she started working as a para in the Crookston schools. After doing that for six years, Denise attended the University of Minnesota-Crookston, and then the University of North Dakota and got a bachelor’s degree in elementary and special education and a master’s degree in special education.

Denise and her husband, Tim, live in the area. She has two daughters Angie and Stephanie; two step-daughters, Tracy and Lynette and four sons-in-law. Between Tim and Denise, they have ten grandchildren ranging in age from 2 - 20.

Why did you choose to be a teacher? My mother and my oldest sister and brother were all teachers, and growing up I said that was something I didn’t ever want to do. But, I have learned: never say never. In becoming a para, I grew to really like the field of education. The teachers that I worked under encouraged me to go to college to become teacher, and so, with a lot of wrestling with my mind, I became “an older than average student” as they so kindly put it.

What did you do before coming to Clearbrook-Gonvick? I worked as a para in the Crookston schools for six years, and then I taught special education in the junior and senior high schools in Crookston for six years.

What is the best part of your job at Clearbrook-Gonvick? I have loved the fact that I have always worked with small groups of students so I have gotten to know them very well. Often, I have worked with the same students for three or more years. It has been rewarding to watch them grow

and mature as learners. It has been fun to reminisce with them, “Remember when such-and-so was so difficult for you, and now you can do that so well.”

What is the biggest challenge of your job? When I was doing special ed, it was keeping up with the paperwork and scheduling meetings. As a reading teacher, the biggest challenge is getting students to become fond of reading and using it as an enjoyable pastime.

If you could have any job in the world - what would it be? Why? I would like to be the scientist who discovers the cure for ALL cancers. I have watched too many people who I care about suffer from this horrible, dreaded disease.

What do you do when you are not at school teaching? My biggest joy is spending time with my family. A great deal of my summer is “Grandma time.” I also like to sew, downhill ski, bicycle, read, volunteer at my church, and bake.

What are your favorite aspects of the Clearbrook-Gonvick community?

Clearbrook-Gonvick is a close knit community where people are always willing to lend a hand to anyone in need.

Any other favorites you would like to share? I really only have one item on my bucket list and that would be to skydive. It has been something I have wanted to do for years, and hopefully, before I lose my nerve, I can experience it.

And now a word (or two) about Mrs. Disrud from the students...

Why do you think Mrs. Disrud decided to become a teacher? “Because she loves kids” “She loves to teach us” “To help children learn about language like adjectives and verbs” “Because she likes teaching. She likes getting to know us.” “She wanted to help kids who had trouble reading.” “Because she is smart”

What is the best thing about Mrs. Disrud? “She’s nice” “On Fridays she lets us play games” “She sometimes gives us barely any work” “She is fun, funny, and has a good sense of humor” “She’s nice.” “She’s funny sometimes. I like her stories she tells.” “She hands out candy.” “She teaches us very well.”

What do you think Mrs. Disrud was like when she was in elementary school? “Funny and smart” “Very nice and had lots of A+” “A nice student” “Smart.” “She was probably a smart girl who had a lot of friends.” “Happy.” “She was crazy.”

What do you think Mrs. Disrud does when she is not teaching? “Probably grading papers” “Eats candy behind her desk” “Go and have fun with her grandchildren” “Probably thinking of what she is going to do next. Have a bunch of fun. Thinking of more fun ideas.” “Sometime thinking of games for us to play.” “Is with her grandchildren.” “Goes to her daughter’s house.”

If you wrote a book about Mrs. Disrud, what would the title be? “The Story of Denise Disrud” “Life of Mrs. Disrud” “The Hawaii Trip” “The Teaching Life of Mrs. Disrud” “Smart Teachers” “Fun Mrs. Disrud” “Happy.” “Cool Mrs. Disrud.”

If you could send Mrs. Disrud on a vacation anywhere in the world, where would you send her? Why would you send her there? “Hawaii because she deserves it and she should get to relax” “Hawaii so she could swim with the dolphins with me” “Hawaii because she always says she wants to go there” “Florida because it is a good vacation place. She needs a good vacation; she works hard.” “Costa Rica because she does a lot of work and she earns it.” “Hawaii, because.” “Cuba or Russia.”

What is one thing Mrs. Disrud ALWAYS says? “Why are you always late?” “Put part of the question in the answer” “Capital letters!” “Start with part of the question.” “Don’t complain.”

Kathleen Kjolhaug has been employed at Clearbrook-Gonvick School for approximately 25 years.

She was born and raised in Springfield, MN where she attended St. Raphael’s first through eighth grade before graduating from Springfield High School. After graduation, she attended the College of St. Benedict graduating with a B.A. in Elementary Education and Social Work.

Kathy lives in Weme with her husband, Pete. They have six children: Luke (Bethannie), Maria(Steve), Heidi(Kris), Christopher, Rebekah, and Esther and three granddaughters Hadley, Sydney, and Lakynn.



Why did you choose to be a teacher? I chose to be a teacher because of the teachers who had influenced my life. While growing up, my family lived one block from school and I was always helping teachers. As each school year began, I would volunteer to help prepare the rooms for the teachers. Watching them enter each grade in the grade book was always so intriguing. I remember working my first year as a teacher at the mission school, and when I placed my order for supplies, I ordered one red pen just like the teachers used when I grew up. I still remember that pen and using it to put X’s in the gradebook my first year of teaching. I think that was the only thing I ordered because I didn’t know schools had a budget for supplies. I thought it was generous to have them buy me one pen.

Years later, it made more sense as to why the principal kept asking, “This is all you want? Don’t you need more supplies than that?” I thought she was being nice, and so I turned down what she was offering because I thought it would cost her money.

What did you do before coming to Clearbrook-Gonvick? Upon completion of my student teaching in St. Cloud, I joined Peace Corps and served on the border of Brazil and Paraguay while working as a rural teacher trainer. That was interesting because where I lived, they spoke three languages: Guarani, Portuguese, and Spanish. I worked as a school social worker at Mahnomen for one year prior to marrying Pete, and then worked at St. Mary’s Mission in Red Lake for three years before we started our family. I stayed home for five years before coming back as a Kindergarten teacher.

What is the best part of your job at Clearbrook-Gonvick? The best part of my job would be the connections with families, students, and staff. Parents desire so much for their children, and the children are so proud to please their parents that when you see that go hand in hand, it’s like a work of art. The canvass is life, and to live it in a way where everyone’s strengths can be utilized is key. It’s also fun to build community by helping students feel connected to one another and to a bigger world. We, as teachers, have the opportunity to do this many times throughout the day. There is simply nothing more fulfilling. To influence one life at a time, one moment at a time is an honor.

What is the biggest challenge of your job? The biggest challenge is to step back and remember that in the midst of so many demands upon students, parents, and teachers, what hasn’t changed are the developmental stages of children. They still need the basics which include creating a safe environment in which to learn, letting them truly know we care, the breaking down of information so they may succeed at learning, and to create a desire to learn as well as a desire to want to return the next day. If we teach to the standards for the sake of standards only but forget the individual is a human being, we will have failed.

If you could have any job in the world - what would it be? Why? Being a photographer for National Geographic would be fun. I love to capture people, especially their faces. I enjoy traveling, and I deeply respect other cultures. To capture what unifies us as human beings within a photograph builds community and reaches hearts. In a world where division is glorified by the media, it would be refreshing to be a part of portraying humanity with respect through the eye of the lens. I’d begin my photography shoot in Rome, Italy, move on to Chennai, India, and then to the Holy Land in Israel. Being a philanthropist would be incredibly fun too. I’d go to dumps all over the world and pluck people out, set them down with dignity into a home and a job of value so they could be contributing members of society and feel loved. Another dream would be to volunteer as a full time missionary where my gifts would be most needed. Perhaps that is what I am living...and so there you go...we are right back at the beginning and perhaps I am right where I am supposed to be in life. It’s always so fun to dream.

What do you do when you are not at school teaching? I enjoy spending time with my family, writing, reading at the lake, making soup, watching HGTV where homes have makeovers within the hour. Of particular enjoyment is House Hunters International and combing the internet for AIR B&B rentals around the world.

What are your favorite aspects of the Clearbrook-Gonvick community? I have two favorite aspects of our community. People come to small towns and only see face value. They count the stores, the restaurants etc. and wonder how we survive up here. But, when you live here and see the global connections and how closely we are tied to them, you feel more blessed than ever. We are a friend away from Russia, a friend away from Africa, a friend away from Costa Rica, Haiti, Korea, Germany, Guatemala etc. However, the best part is that you know who to turn to for prayer. It's been the biggest blessing to know that people are willing to pray, and that I can turn to a faith based community who will do just that. For this, I am so very grateful.

And now a word (or two) about Mrs. Kjolhaug from the students...

Why do you think Mrs. Kjolhaug decided to become a teacher? "She likes helping students become better readers." "Because she likes to teach reading." "She likes being a teacher." "Because she wanted to teach some reading and make people get better." "Because she thought it was fun." "Because she likes kids." "To help students read." "She wanted to help kids learn." "She wanted kids to be good readers so they don't mess up."

What is the best thing about Mrs. Kjolhaug? "She really likes helping people." "That she teaches people." "That we can have stations." "Um, she sometimes lets us play games." "That she knows what to do." "She is funny." "She lets us play games." "She's funny." "I get to read with her."

What do you think Mrs. Kjolhaug was like when she was in elementary school? "She was willing to help people." "Good student." "Creative." "That she reads with us." "Really good at reading." "Happy." "She could have fun." "Kind." "I bet she loved school at her little age."

What job do you think Mrs. Kjolhaug would have if she was not a teacher? "She would be a book publisher." "A nurse." "A mom." "Gym teacher, because she wears sweatpants a lot." "A principal." "Writer." "Librarian." "Artist." "A cop, I think she would like arresting people."

If you wrote a book about Mrs. Kjolhaug, what would the title be? "Mrs. Kjolhaug and the books." "Mrs. K's Life Story." "The day Mrs. K went sledding." "Mrs. Kjolhaug is Nice."

If you could send Mrs. Kjolhaug on a vacation anywhere in the world, where would you send her? Why would you send her there? "Hawaii. It is warm and she deserves it for all she has done." "China." "Mexico." "Canada because she wants to." "The cities, fun to go there." "China because it is a good place and she can talk Chinese or Spanish there."

What is one thing Mrs. Kjolhaug ALWAYS says? “That we have to read.” “Come over here and read!” “Chunk it.” “If you practice, you become better.” “You need to write your letters better.” “Get your work done.” “Don’t stare at me.” “Welcome back.” “Pardon.”