

Speegleville principal spent entire 41-year career at same school

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**By TODD GLASSCOCK**

Walter Drake had never seen swamp coolers until he interviewed for a teaching position in the Speegleville school district in 1966. In his hometown of Houston, the humidity is too high for the machines — which cool spaces using evaporation — to work effectively.

But there he was in the small community west of Waco — swamp coolers in the school's windows — and the recent Baylor University graduate was ready to put his education into service. Drake was following the advice of a former junior high coach, now an administrator, who had talked with him when he had applied for a teaching job in Houston. "Go out to a little school in the country; get some experience," Drake was told.

And Drake did just that. There were plenty of small school districts in McLennan County — Rosenthal, Gholson, Speegleville, and others — that might need a teacher, and it turned out Speegleville did.

When he stepped into the combined classroom of about 26 fifth- and sixth-graders to begin his first teaching job, he couldn't have known this would be the beginning of something more than just going to a little school in the country to get some experience.

Like some teachers, he moved from the classroom to administration. Drake will retire in June with the distinction of spending 41 years at the same school, having seen its changes from consolidation to computers in every classroom.

His longevity has become woven into the tapestry of the school's way of operating, said Sherry DeHay, a kindergarten teacher who has taught at Speegleville for 15 years.

He made the school a steady boat, she said. "It's just a pleasant, calm place to be. It's a jewel of a place to work," DeHay said.

That stability also can be seen in how many generations have been in Drake's presence at the school. In one case, as many as three generations — mother, son and grandson — were Drake's students, either when he was a teacher or as principal.

"He knows how to free teachers to do their work," she said. "He trusts you."

With both students and teachers he's always been kind, he said. She recalled watching Drake work with one troubled student. He went outside with the boy, sat down and talked with him, his manner always gentle but firm, she said.

But he could show a funny side, she said. In the early 1980s the faculty and staff would put together a haunted house for the fall carnival. Drake played the corpse that would pop out of the coffin for dramatic effect.

"The kids ran out screaming every time," DeHay said. "It was particularly funny because he is so mild-mannered and quiet by nature."

Kim Scott, director for campus recreation at Baylor, recalls his care for students when she attended in the '70s. Before there was government funding to assist with breakfast, Drake would buy doughnuts and milk and take them to the school, she said.

For 15 cents students could get two doughnuts and a milk. He wanted to make sure every kid had breakfast, she said.

In 1966 Drake had heard about the teaching position from John Forshey, who ran Campus Cleaners in Waco where Drake worked, and who happened to be the superintendent at Speegleville.

The school board interviewed Drake, and though he had secondary certification, he was hired to teach fifth- and sixth-grade social studies and English. Back then Speegleville taught grades 1-8.

Change came almost immediately after Drake started. Forshey had decided to step down from his administrative position, so Drake would have a new boss, Lee Ballew, as he was beginning his own career.

One challenge small districts like Speegleville faced when Drake began his teaching career was the student-teacher ratio. It's a challenge schools face today as well, but then, instead of possibly having too many students and not enough teachers, Speegleville sometimes faced not having enough students, which led to the possibility that a teacher might lose his or her job.

"Real small school districts always worried whether there would be enough students," he said.

Drake's job, though, remained secure. It wasn't long, in fact, before the student-teacher ratio leveled out, and Drake was able to teach just a sixth-grade class.

Speegleville seemed to fit him, and teaching there gave him an opportunity to further his own education by beginning study toward a counseling degree at Baylor.

A new direction in his career as an educator was about to develop. It wouldn't be in the field of educational counseling.

In 1972, the school board faced a dilemma. Ballew was leaving. The school needed a principal, and the board put in a call to Drake. The board said it could help Drake get an emergency administrative certification if he would consider the position.

He accepted the board's offer, and acquired three roles. He would still teach, but also would serve as part-time principal and part-time superintendent. Well, make that four roles. For some time he coached girls' basketball.

For about seven years his schedule was hectic. Each day, until about 2 p.m., he taught his sixth-grade class. At around 2:30 p.m., he taught P.E. After that he was principal and superintendent.

His role changed again in 1979 when Speegleville consolidated with Midway. With consolidation he stepped out of the classroom, and became Speegleville Elementary's full-time principal. Over the next several years consolidation brought several changes: Speegleville would be one of five elementary schools in the Midway system, along with Hewitt, Spring Valley, South Bosque and Woodway; and by 1985 Speegleville would serve kindergarten students as well. The school now serves kindergarten to the fourth grade.

One constant that seems to have influenced Drake's long tenure is the Speegleville community's support of its school, in the form of an active PTA as well as individually involved parents.

"The PTA has backed the school 110 percent," Drake said.

Early on, when Drake started, the PTA organized a fundraising campaign to replace the swamp coolers with wall units. As the school expanded in the 1980s and '90s to meet the needs of students in the community, the PTA helped back that expansion, providing funds for a better playground.

The PTA's involvement with the school continues today, Drake said, funding events such as field trips, and getting facilities such as a running track built.

While a supportive community is one reason Drake has stayed at Speegleville, change itself is another reason. Students, teachers, the school building and technology have changed through the years. Drake recalls when the school had only four telephones, instead of a phone in every classroom, and the first time a handheld calculator was brought in by one of the students. Now there are computers in each classroom.

Each decade has had its own challenges, from teaching two classes in one room in 1966, to consolidation in 1979, to meeting every student's needs as fairly as possible from year to year. "Things have changed about every four to five years; it hasn't been the same old thing all along, and that kind of keeps me going," he said.

There's also his love of the profession, of being an educator, even when not in the classroom.

"I always had the idea to help other people," he said of why he went into education.

He was surrounded by teachers on both sides of the family while growing up, but entered the University of Houston with the desire to be architect. After his first year there he reassessed his goals, decided he wanted to teach, and enrolled at Baylor.

On Good Friday of this year, the students and most of the teachers at Speegleville Elementary were out for the holiday, but Drake was at the school, going over budgets and making sure everything was prepared for Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills testing. Even out of the classroom, he wants to make sure his students will be able to move toward success. He hopes they'll have a good attitude toward learning when they leave the school.

He will be missed by students and former students. Tony Marquez, manager of the Starbucks at Bosque Boulevard and Wooded Acres Drive, was a student at Speegleville and has a tradition of family involvement in the school. His mother was a student when Drake was teaching, and his 6-year-old son Nicholas is a student now.

Drake epitomizes a role model, he said. Drake was firm but loving with discipline, something Marquez did not always recognize as a student, but came to see in Drake's interaction with his son. He has a sense of gratitude for Drake's service to the school. Many in the Speegleville community will miss him, he said.

"He's helped shape a lot of individuals," Marquez said. "He's become a part of that school."

When Drake first told his staff he was retiring, there wasn't a dry eye in the library where they were meeting, DeHay said. After he talked with the staff — it was a teacher work day — he left the library. He had said the teachers could leave to go work in their classrooms. No one left for about an hour, and he came back in. Each teacher spent the hour reflecting about how glad they were to have gotten a chance to work with him, DeHay said.

"We are all sad to see him go," DeHay said.

When the new school year comes at the end of the summer, Drake knows it will be the first school year since he was in kindergarten that he won't be preparing to go to school, whether as a student, a teacher or an administrator.

It's clear being an educator is something he loves. In his administrative role, he has never stopped thinking of himself as a teacher. "I'll miss the kids," he said, as well as the teachers and staff.

He gives tours of the campus as if it were his second home: At the entrance he points out diplomas from 1925 when Speegleville schools went through high school; he goes through each hallway knowing when an addition was made; he shows off the library and student projects — one class is raising butterflies — and he even notes some of the security measures now in place, knowing that change is constant.