

Suzette's Students

Dedicated Cinco Ranch Junior High teacher Suzette Steward is named Teacher of the Year on *Live with Kelly and Michael*

Written by Susan Perini | Select photography by Melissa Crowder

When Lisa Clements nominated Suzette Steward for the National Teacher of the Year Award from the daytime talk show *Live with Kelly and Michael*, she wrote, "You just have to meet her. [Suzette] has more energy, passion, and love for kids than you will find in any other human being."

Clements should know. She is the mom of one of the many children whose lives have been impacted by Steward's passion and dedication during her years teaching in Katy ISD.

More Than a Teacher

"I'm just a teacher," shrugs Steward in the video shown on *Live with Kelly and Michael*. "I go to work to do what I need to do, so my kids can be better individuals later on in life."

But anyone who knows Steward, knows she's more than "just" a teacher. Steward, who grew up in Katy, was inspired early in life to work with people with special needs. After earning her degree in recreational therapy, she began working in Katy ISD in 2004 at Exley Elementary. When her students graduated to junior high, she moved with them and began teaching the Junior Child Autism Program (JCAP) at Cinco Ranch Junior High (CRJH). Simultaneously, Steward began working tirelessly with the Special Olympics program, as well as starting two camp programs of her own - Camp

Journey and Camp Rocks - both of which offer a variety of activities for children with autism.

Team Suzette

After Clements submitted her letter nominating Steward for the National Teacher of the Year award, Steward, who was unaware of the nomination, easily slid into the top 12.

CRJH principal Elizabeth Kuylen was thrilled when she received a call from the show's producers telling her that Steward was a finalist. "She deserves to have this recognition," Kuylen says. "With Suzette, what you see is what you get. She really does have that much energy, enthusiasm, and passion."

When 12 finalists were narrowed down to five, Steward flew to New York to appear on *Live with Kelly and Michael*. Friends and co-workers donned "Team Suzette" shirts and rallied to get people to vote for her - which wasn't difficult. Everyone who knows Steward is touched by her commitment to students and her genuine enthusiasm for teaching.

Beyond the Classroom

Steward's work is not simply confined to the classroom. Every weekday, Steward runs an after-school exercise program where her students can interact with the

Steward with CRJH student
Marcus Cawthorne



Steward works with one of her
special education students,
Christian Zeiter



“Every day, I get to help these kids reach new goals and master things they’ve never imagined doing. I am living my dream.”

- Suzette Steward

Suzette Steward, a special education teacher at Cinco Ranch Junior High, was named as the National Teacher of the Year on *Live with Kelly and Michael*



Suzette pictured with her husband Colin Coates, Kelly Ripa, and Michael Strahan

Photo by Lorenzo Bevilacqua/Disney-ABC Television



Garrett Polk loves attending Steward's program Camp Rocks

community while burning off some excess energy. She opens her home to her students on Friday nights, Saturdays, and even Sundays to offer "weekend respite" for parents. Instead of summer vacation, Steward spearheads Camp Journey, 11 weeklong day camps for kids with special needs. Camp Rocks takes place on weekends and holidays throughout the year. Remarking on Steward's level of dedication, Kuylen quips, "As far as I know, she doesn't sleep." Steward always runs an after-school care program to provide her students with much-needed physical activity.

"She really is amazing," says Renee Thomas, a fellow Katy ISD teacher whose son Garrett has reaped the benefits of Steward's work with the Special Olympics, Camp Journey, and Camp Rocks. "She has a passion for children. Garrett, even with his limited verbal skills, actually asks to go to Camp Rocks!"

The Big Win

On May 7, 2013, Kuylen received the news that Steward was the winner. She arranged for Steward's husband, family, friends, students, and co-workers to surround Steward outside the front of the school as she heard the exciting news. Steward was overwhelmed. "It's such an honor," she says. "I feel like it shines a light on our program, the staff, the kids, and their parents. It isn't just my award; it's for us all."

Steward won a new car from Ford, as well as a much-deserved Tahitian vacation - which she has yet to take. CRJH was awarded \$25,000 and five Mobi Learners, which

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When she is not in the classroom, Steward is active with Camp Journey, Camp Rocks, and the Special Olympics

allow multiple students to interact with lesson content simultaneously, creating a more collaborative classroom. With the award money, Kuylen has also purchased additional technology items for the school including 25 iPads, three document cameras, projectors, a new set of graphing calculators, clickers, and some equipment for the art department.

Kuylen hopes the attention brought to their JCAP program will produce more community awareness of Katy students with special needs as well as more support for programs like Steward's that meet their needs.

Living the Dream

Steward plans to continue working with special needs students. "Every day, I get to help these kids reach new goals and master things they've never imagined doing," she says. "I am living my dream."

In the future, Steward hopes to become more active with Home and Community-based Services, a support group for families of people with disabilities which provides vocational training and group homes. She would like to have her own special needs community someday. In the meantime, she will continue to do what she does best: love, inspire, and teach. **KM**



Steward considers it a dream come true to see students like Anthony Rodriguez excel

SUSAN PERINI lives in Katy with her husband and three children, one of whom has autism.



Steward says the award represents Cinco Ranch Junior High, their program, her students, and their parents



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