

Hideko Forzley

School: International School

Why she's amazing: Forzley teaches kindergartners in a Japanese immersion classroom. She's known for her infectious smile and warm, enthusiastic teaching style.

“Because I was an only child, I thought maybe I could try something that my parents never thought about. I said, ‘Well, maybe I could teach Japanese.’ I wanted to explore a different country and see what I could do.”

— Hideko Forzley

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2023 AMAZING EDUCATOR: PORTLAND

The magic of immersion

Hideko Forzley teaches tomorrow's leaders to be well-rounded and open-minded

Inside Hideko Forzley's kindergarten classroom, children's tiny shoes line the wall. It's a Japanese tradition she bestows upon her young students at the International School of Portland.

Forzley, 47, is part of the Japanese track at the International School, which uses language immersion to teach K-5 students.

The private school prides itself on immersing students in the customs and language of other countries through curriculum offered in Japanese, Chinese and Spanish. The school also follows an International Baccalaureate (IB) program of learning and inquiry.

On a Wednesday afternoon in February, her students gather at tables and string 100 beads together on long pieces of thread. The activity commemorates their 100th day of school and teaches them to count, share and communicate.

Forzley pauses to answer a student's question, replying in Japanese.

“I think my personality fits the younger students,” Forzley said, flashing her signature smile. Forzley, who's been teaching for nearly 25 years, was born and raised in Tokyo. She moved to Portland promptly after graduating college and landed a teaching job at the International School, where she's been ever since.

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Hideko Forzley works with kindergartners in her Japanese immersion classroom. Forzley has been teaching at the International School of Portland for nearly 25 years.

PMG PHOTO: JAIME VALDEZ

something that my parents never thought about. I said, ‘Well, maybe I could teach Japanese,’” Forzley said. “I wanted to explore a different country and see what I could do.”

Her eagerness to challenge herself and gain life experience outside the confines of her comfort zone correlates well with what she does now.

Her kindergarten students learn basic Japanese phrases and customs, like removing shoes before entering a room or, in their case, keeping a pair of “inside” shoes in the classroom. Forzley teaches Japanese phrases students can expect to hear repeated in their classrooms. They get familiarized with the basics before delving deeper into the Japanese language and alphabet as they progress to higher grades.

“Language is one of the learning tools,” Forzley

explained. She's not teaching kids to speak the language, rather, teaching them phrases they can incorporate. “I want them to think of Japanese as useful tools,” she said. “Usually, if it's fun and meaningful for them, it's fun to learn for them.”

The veteran educator said language immersion and the IB program prepare her students to be more well-rounded, open-minded, and accepted of people from diverse backgrounds.

The school's programs and curriculum attract families, but it was Forzley's personality that sealed the deal for Roy Yotsuuye's family when they moved to Ridgefield, Wash. nearly 25 years ago.

Yotsuuye liked the school, but wasn't sure if he could drive his daughters from Ridgefield to Portland each

day. He met Forzley during a visit to the school.

“Instantly, there's kind of a warmth,” he recalled. “I felt comfortable and my daughter felt comfortable. I didn't even investigate the other tracks, I said, ‘I met this teacher.’”

The International School of Portland has several staff with a long tenure at the school, but Forzley is the only current teacher to have a fund created in her honor. In 2018, Sean Onitsuka established the Sensei Fund in honor of Forzley, who taught his children when they attended ISP.

“She has been like a second mother to so many kids, even before she had her own,” Onitsuka said at the time of the school's announcement of the Sensei Fund. “She makes everyone feel welcome from the

moment they walk in the door.”

The fund, established as part of Onitsuka's estate and combined community donations, will support the Japanese track at the school.

ISP's Head of School, Bodo Heiliger, said the independent school strives to give teachers from international backgrounds a place to thrive.

“We have several educators who've been here for over 20 years,” Heiliger said. “We honor and celebrate who they are.”

Forzley said she's found comfort in the community she's created in Portland, comparing her school to “a small family.” But working with young children renews her enthusiasm each year.

“When I see the student's face and the joy of learning ... then that's my reward. The students are my reward.”