YOUNGSTOWN -- YCSD officials announced Tuesday morning that Brogan Todd, who teaches at Volney Rogers Elementary School is this year’s YCSD Teacher of the Year.

Brogan learned in a surprise ceremony that she was this year’s winner, selected after a series of interviews and classroom observations.

“I am definitely speechless,” Todd said after this morning’s surprise announcement in the school’s library. “I would never have imagined that in a million years. I am so honored and humbled to be chosen for the Teacher of the Year for the Youngstown City School District.”

TOTY candidates are nominated by the principal in the building where they teach. All of the nominees will be honored May 8 with a dinner in the Mahoning Valley Historical Society Tyler Center Ballroom.

“Brogan is the type of teacher that I want my children to have,” said Kelly Weeks, Volney principal. “She puts kids’ needs first. She’s a team player. She goes above and beyond the call of duty with everything. She has high standards for her students and she loves them with her entire heart.”

The nominees:
LeTanya Brown, a kindergarten teacher at Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School, is that school’s 2018 TOTY nominee. She’s been teaching kindergarten at YCSD for 29 years. She lists her
mother, Corine Phifer, and her high school Spanish teacher, Mary Dutko, as those whose influence led her to a teaching career. Her mom taught in the city schools for 35 years and stressed the importance of education to her children. Dutko offered Brown a different perspective. “I never thought I would use Spanish after graduation, but I find myself using what I learned from Mrs. Dutko daily in my ELL [English Language Learners] classroom,” Brown said.

Mary Jo Ferguson, an intervention specialist, is Chaney High School’s nominee. She’s in her 25th year of teaching and all of those years have been with YCSD. She works in multi-handicapped autism class at the high school. “The best part of teaching is seeing my students develop the skills they need to become independent adults,” she said.

Like many of the nominees, Ferguson played school when she was a child. It wasn’t until she had her own children though that she decided to become a teacher. “I believe that my job as a teacher is to facilitate the students in the learning process,” Ferguson said. “I want them to develop skills which will enable them to lead life as independently as possible. They cannot do that if I am constantly telling them what to do.”

Lisa Mattiussi is Williamson Elementary School’s TOTY nominee. She teaches first grade at the school and started her career in 1987 in the city school district.

“The best part of my job is to witness the young boys and girls get so excited to learn something new and realize their potential as they master such accomplishments as reading a more difficult book, solving a complicated math problem and becoming the future great leaders of our society,” Mattiussi said.

She credits educators who taught her as a child as well as those with whom she’s worked with helping to guide her teaching career. “However, my biggest influence and inspiration in my life and career choice has been my father, Joseph Reda,” Mattiussi said. “My dad was a respected and well-loved teacher and administrator in the Youngstown Schools for many years. His love, dedication and passion for working with students, teachers, and fellow administrators was so contagious that I proudly followed in his footsteps.”

Sgt. Douglas Moon, the Army JROTC instructor at East High School, is that school’s 2018 Teacher of the Year nominee. He began teaching at YCSD 15 years ago following a career in the U.S. Army. In the Army, Moon served as the Cleveland recruiting battalion master trainer and trained more than 200 soldiers in how to be successful recruiters. He discovered that he enjoyed working with people to achieve their goals. Moon says his parents served as the inspiration in his life.

“I learned growing up that nothing in life is free and that you have to earn everything,” he said. “Challenges, failure and success are all due to your decisions. You must learn from life experiences and try not to make bad decisions. My parents always worked hard and provided me with positive role models.”

Kristy Olinik, public safety instructor, is this year’s nominee for Choffin Career and Technical Center. She started her teaching career there five years ago.

“I think teaching is a calling,” she said. “You either have it or you don’t. It is building students into what they are meant to be.”

She decided to teach after she was asked by then-Choffin administration to run the school’s new public safety program. She had
worked as a school resource officer at the career and technical center.

“The students inspire me everyday,” Olinik said. “They inspire me to listen harder, work harder, push harder and most of all remember everyone in this world is different and if you just care enough they will see it.”

Tracy Palmer, Harding Elementary School’s nominee, teaches third grade. She’s been a teacher for 10 years with the last four of them at YCSD.

Her favorite part of teaching is helping students unlock their hidden potential and become better versions of themselves. A teacher helped Palmer do that when she in school. “My aunt and uncle and a fourth grade teacher saw the potential in me,” she said. “Mrs. Anderson gave me my love of reading and inspired me to not allow excuses to keep me from who I was meant to be. My aunt and uncle gave me the power of believing in myself. Their belief in me is why I am teaching today.”

Spanish teacher Marines Ramos is Youngstown Early College’s nominee for Teacher of the Year. She started there in 2016 but also worked at the former East Middle School. Her favorite part of teaching is watching students grow academically, emotionally and socially.

“I am elated when my students come to my classroom of their own free will outside of their scheduled class time to engage in conversation about the themes taught during class time,” Ramos said. “This allows me to build trusting relationships with the students and when they trust you they let down their guards so that they can learn.”

Lisa Saadey earned the nomination as Rayen Early College Intermediate School’s TOTY this year. She is in her 29th year as a teacher and she’s been with YCSD the whole time.

“I have been teaching for so long that I can’t even remember what got me started in the first place,” Saadey quipped. “All I know now is that I love it.”

She says the best part of her job is seeing her former students succeed in their lives. “A person that truly inspired me was my first principal at Roosevelt Elementary School, [the late] Runita Adams,” Saadey said. “I was new to teaching and she took me under her wing and treated me like family even though she didn’t have to.”

Amanda Signor, who teaches third grade, is Wilson Elementary’s teacher nominee. She’s been a teacher for three years, but she’s worked with children in other capacities -- tutor, cheerleading coach, youth ministry leader -- for many more years.

“The best part of my job is the kiddos,” Signor said. “It is incredible to see the social, emotional and academic growth they make through the progression of the year. I love the aha moments when light bulbs go off and they get really excited about their learning.”

Erica Sofranko, a first-grade teacher, is the TOTY nominee from Kirkmere Elementary School this year. She’s been teaching since 2008 and at YCSD since 2010. “I decided I want to be a teacher because children need good role models and leaders,” Sofranko said. “Many children come from broken homes and I want to help them find their place in life and make good decisions. They need a positive role model they can seek advice and guidance from.”

Taft Elementary School’s nominee is veteran teacher Diana Vrabel. She’s been a teacher for 35 years and with YCSD for 20 years. “The best part of my job is seeing the surprise and joy in my students’ eyes when we do something that they state is ‘fun’ and then they realize that they were actually learning,” Vrable said. “I love teaching using strategies that get my students involved and moving and collaborating and having a good time.”

She is inspired by many of the teachers she’s met and worked with during her 35-year teaching career.

Ron Walcott, a fifth-grade teacher at Paul C. Bunn Elementary School, is that school’s TOTY nominee for this year. He’s been teaching for 39 years, 34 of them at YCSD.

He discovered his love of teaching as a child, working with a younger sister who is deaf.

“I learned compassion and patience from those hours I spent at the dining room table with her,” Walcott said.

His parents stressed the importance of education and were instrumental in developing and sharing his love of learning. He’s been inspired by many teachers in his life, but his fifth-grade teacher particularly stands out.

“He worked individually with me, providing reassurance and guidance that enabled me to find success as a struggling fifth grader,” Walcott said. “With his tireless efforts, I learned that challenges can be overcome and goals and dreams can be accomplished with hard work and determination. More importantly, I learned the value of having a caring, dedicated teacher in my life. It was then I knew undoubtedly that I wanted to do the same for others.”

Debra Wood, a preschool teacher, is this year’s nominee from William Holmes McGuffey Elementary School.

She’s been teacher at YCSD for 27 years and worked in other schools for four additional years.

“The best part of my job is watching as the preschoolers develop new skills and friendships with their peers,” Wood said. “It is also exciting to be able to work with their parents as well and help them understand their development and needs. Making a positive connection as early as preschool is beneficial for the kids throughout their schooling.”

She knew from a young age that she wanted to be a teacher but when she was in high school, she volunteered in a special education classroom. That’s when she decided she wanted to teach children with special needs.
YCSD parents and teachers honor each other

Hundreds of parents, teachers and family members from YCSD filled the Stambaugh Auditorium ballroom the evening of April 27 for the school district’s 12th annual Parent Title I Conference.

While the conference is a yearly event convened to honor parents, this year’s honored teachers as well. Parents nominated parents for recognition and vice versa. The event drew more than 600 people.

The conference’s theme was “Changing the Narrative,” targeting the misperception that YCSD parents aren’t involved in their children’s education and that parents and teachers don’t work well together. It’s usually a morning conference, but this year, Linda Hoey, chief of family engagement, wanted to offer parents and teachers a night out.

The evening included dinner, photographs on the red carpet, singing by both Hoey and Angela McCoy, Williamson Elementary School’s parent engagement coordinator; the awards and speakers including CEO Krish Mohip, Superintendent Joseph Meranto and Rayen Early College Intermediate School teacher Maureen Donofrio. Each parent and each teacher received a trophy.

Author and educator Dr. Chike Akua was the featured speaker for the conference. Attendance this year far surpassed previous years.
New sport emerges at East

Youngstown City School District debuted a new sport this year with the East Golden Bears rugby team. Check out the story from WFMJ 21 News:  http://www.wfmj.com/clip/14312588/rugby-debuts-at-east-high-school

Photo by Traci Cain Photography