Class Acts: Mary Asgill, Turlock High School

Soraya Fregosi nominated Mary Asgill for Class Acts. Fregosi said Asgill is a special, talented and dedicated teacher who pushes her students to "find their voice in writing." Asgill puts on a literary night at the end of the school year to showcase her students' writing and public speaking talents, Fregosi said.

**Name:** Mary Asgill

**City of residence:** Delhi

**Occupation:** English teacher, Turlock High School

**Family:** Married, three children

**Education background:** Bachelor's in English; master's in reading; former literacy coach; current Great Valley Writing Project teacher consultant

**Teaching experience:** 16 years

**Why did you get into teaching?** When I was in high school, I had an opportunity to volunteer in a literacy program at my church and saw, firsthand, the terrible emotional and economic impact of functional illiteracy on people's lives. I decided to try to help bridge the gap between the haves and have-nots as much as I could.

**What is your favorite thing about being a teacher?** One of my favorite things is seeing a student who had zero buy-in to education, zero belief that school had anything to offer him, change his mind and decide to give learning a try and change his path.

**What is the most challenging part of your job?** Balance. Teaching can be very taxing -- especially with 150 students and 150 essays to grade, etc. The work is literally never done, so finding ways to balance teaching demands with life demands can pose a bit of a challenge.
What is the most important lesson you've learned? To continue updating my knowledge and examining my practice. New research, teaching strategies, approaches to curriculum and instruction, brain research, adolescent psychology and the like are all foundations for good teaching practice, so no matter how long a teacher has taught, it's important to learn, unlearn, think and rethink what we do to ensure that we help our students.

What is your favorite teaching tool or activity? Students have grown up in this age of technology, so I've learned to use technology as a tool they can easily use. We have a class wiki, a collaborative reading and writing Web site. I might use the wiki to post a video clip about a current event, or a radio interview with an author, or a scholarly article. Then in small groups, we meet online, using the discussion board to analyze and evaluate the work. We then write, collaboratively, about it. The wiki allows students to tap into their knowledge of technology but also learn to read multiple texts -- texts that come in the form of images and sound as well as alphanumeric forms.

What's next in your classroom? I will ask students to engage in problem-based learning. In the past we have tackled problems in education, the environment, the economy and the like. This year, our focus will be on community. The central question will be this: What is the relationship and responsibility of the individual to his or her community, and what problems exist within that community that can be solved? I will ask them to look at, understand and try to solve real-world problems within their communities.

What advice do you have for students? Students should always believe that they can achieve the goals they set for themselves and take the steps to put plans in motion. I try to help my 11th- and 12th-grade students understand that high school is very different from the real world, so they'll need a plan. I help them stay focused on life after high school by having them research the steps they will take after graduation, whether it's college, military, the workplace or vocational school.

What advice do you have for parents? Find a way to stay in touch with children, especially teenagers who can be very private people when it comes to sharing information about their school day and social lives. Sometimes parents are the last people to know what's going on in a teenager's life, so staying in touch with teachers, coaches, campus supervisors, librarians, youth pastors, employers and any other adult associated with the teenager is always a good idea. It's also a good idea for parents to be more concerned about being parents of their teenagers than being friends with their teenagers.

What will it take to improve academic success in the valley? Recognition that we should not throw out the old ways of teaching, just because the latest, newest method has come along, is a start. Some of my best mentors are veteran teachers who have taught for many years using techniques that set the foundations of good teaching practice. We should also recognize that everyone has to help in the literacy effort, including business, churches, city governments, neighborhoods, bookstores, coffeehouses -- everyone.

How do you to reach students not interested in school? I find many ways to insert myself into their lives to show them that I am here for them and that I care. I connect with their parents, other
teachers, counselors, coaches, significant others, friends and employers. I tutor before school, during my prep period and after school. I communicate online with them on the class wiki and class e-mail. I help them find jobs. I make sure that I direct them to resources to help them with emotional or socioeconomic challenges. I attend their football games and theater performances. I am always there to show them that I'm not just a teacher for them in the classroom, but outside of the classroom as well.

**What one area should schools put more emphasis on?** Focusing on the reciprocal process of reading and writing is key. Every teacher, no matter what content area, should teach reading strategies and teach students to write about what they read or learn. High school students know how to read, but may not always understand what they've read, or how to analyze, synthesize or evaluate the information, so teaching students reading strategies -- how to deconstruct text structures, particularly in nonfiction -- should be a daily focus.

**If you could change one thing about the current educational system, what would it be and why?** One great thing about this current era of accountability, data-driven teaching and collaboration is that teachers have a better handle on how to help students, but one of the downsides is that the pace of teaching is accelerated. Teaching takes time. Classrooms contain a vast variety of learners, and teaching all of them requires mastering the skill of differentiating the curriculum and instruction to meet the needs of every student in the room. This requires time. If I were queen of the education world, I'd slow the pace of instruction.

**What would surprise people about your job?** Teenagers are very cool people. People tend to believe that teenagers are difficult and downright scary to be around all day. That is so very far from the truth! I have one of the few jobs in the world where I can go to work every day and hear engaging discussions, read powerful insights, and have side-splitting laughter with some of the best and brightest in the world.

"Class Acts" is a weekly spotlight on outstanding teachers in the Northern San Joaquin Valley and foothills. If you would like to nominate someone, please send his or her name and contact information, along with your name, phone number and the reason for the nomination, to kaiello@modbee.com.