



- 2011 Texas Elementary Teacher of the Year Daniel Leija
 - ATPE member
- Fifth-grade math and science teacher at Northside (20) ISD's Esparza Elementary School

DAN, DAN THE SCIENCE MAN

ONE SECOND-CAREER EDUCATOR—A RETIRED AIR FORCE MEDIC—PLUS A ROOMFUL OF FIFTH-GRADERS EQUALS TEACHING MAGIC. ATPE SITS DOWN WITH 2011 TEXAS TEACHER OF THE YEAR DANIEL LEIJA, A MEMBER OF NORTHSIDE (20) ATPE, FOR A CONVERSATION ABOUT QUICK-AND-DIRTY EXPERIMENTS AND WHAT KIDS NEED FROM TEACHERS IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD.

Interview by Kate Johanns ■ Photos by John Kilpper

■ **ATPE:** How did your childhood—growing up in Idaho, one of 13 brothers and sisters, the child of migrant farm workers from Mexico—lead you to where you are today?

■ **LEIJA:** That was the life I knew, working in the fields. One particular day, I tell people, it was really hot, it was really windy, and I was out in the onion fields. I was really, really upset. I was probably 8 or 9 years old. My friends were riding by on their bikes, going to the swimming pool, and I was stuck in this onion field. I was crying. Dad laughed at me. He asked me, “Do you like this?” I said, “No, I hate this.” He said, “Well, you better go to school and graduate and make something of yourself.” You know what, he really knew what he was doing. It pushed me to get out of that. I went ahead and joined the Air Force. I was a medic and a nurse for 22 years, and I really enjoyed that.

■ **ATPE:** After such a long career in the Air Force, how did you end up in a fifth-grade classroom?

■ **LEIJA:** I fell in love with teaching when I was teaching flight school at Brooks Air Force Base. To tell you the truth, I was kind of upset when I first got that job. I had been working in hyperbaric medicine, and I really enjoyed it, and then they pulled me over to teach. But once I got behind



the podium, it was great. I thought, this is what I want to do for the rest of my life. I was also mentoring at a couple of elementary schools near Brooks Air Force Base and working with the Children’s Association for Maximum Potential, a camp for physically handicapped kids. I just fell in love with working with a group of kids.

■ **ATPE:** How does your Air Force background influence your teaching style?

■ **LEIJA:** I really believe there’s a gold mine—an untapped gold mine—within the military community. I’ve told folks: There are military instructors out there who would run rings around me. Military people have the discipline, and we’re

going to see things through to the end. We can’t fail. We’re going to do whatever it takes to get the job done. We’re used to coming in early, getting everything prepped, and then staying late and having everything ready for the next day. It’s a mindset that comes with being in the military community, and you just carry it on. Also, the majority of us [ex-military faculty on his campus] are Air Force, and we carry those three Air Force pillars with us into the civilian teaching community: Integrity first. Service before self. Excellence in all we do. You know what: If you hang with those three, you’re going to be fine. Just keep those as your guiding posts. You’re going to get through anything.

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FAST FACTS ABOUT ELEMENTARY TEACHER OF THE YEAR DANIEL LEIJA



COURTESY OF DANIEL LEIJA

1 Leija, one of 13 children, grew up tending onion fields that his parents purchased using savings from their wages as migrant farm workers.

2 A retired Air Force medic, Leija now mentors military personnel aspiring to become educators through the Troops to Teachers program.

3 Displayed in Leija’s fifth-grade classroom at Northside (20) ISD’s Esparza Elementary School are photographs of his eighth-grade physical education teacher and his ninth-grade English teacher.

4 Leija’s iPod is loaded with playlists he creates to set the tone in his classroom and help students sustain concentration. “For example, when the students are involved in deep thought or writing activities, you want to use an instrumental selection around 60 to 80 beats per minute,” Leija says. “When the kids are up and working on active activities, you want to bump up the beat of the music.” Leija recently did a volunteer presentation on music in the classroom for education gradu-

ate students at the University of the Incarnate Word (his alma mater).

5 The Institute of Texan Cultures, part of the University of Texas at San Antonio, has included Leija’s shoes and hat in its 2011 “Texan Head to Foot” exhibit. Leija’s attire is featured alongside that of legendary Texans such as Lady Bird Johnson, Mary Kay Ash, Red McCombs, Michael Dell, Dan Rather and George Strait. The exhibit runs until May 1. For more information, visit www.texancultures.com.

■ **ATPE:** What do you think set you apart during the Teacher of the Year selection process?

■ **LEIJA:** I'm available to my kids 24 hours a day. At the beginning of the year, my kids and my parents get my business card. It's got my home phone, my cell phone and my work phone, and I tell them that I am here for you. In the 11 years that I've been doing this, I've had so many people come up to me and say, "You're crazy. Why are you giving them your phone number? They're going to be calling you!" But they really don't. It's almost like a privilege to call you. They only call when they're stuck with homework. Like last night, I fielded four phone calls from the kids. They were stuck on a certain problem. I've told people that I would rather take five minutes out of my life to help that kid through that problem than have them be scared to come to school the next day. At the end of the year, when they leave, I give them another business card. I say, don't lose this. I don't care if you're in middle school, high school or college, if you need something, call me. I tell the parents that if they need help with a college app, if they need a letter of reference, call me.

■ **ATPE:** As Teacher of the Year, you'll have many opportunities to represent public education. What messages do you hope to share?

■ **LEIJA:** What I didn't realize about being Teacher of the Year is that it's not just a one-year thing. You become an advocate, a voice for teachers. I really want to let people know who we are. It's important that people know that we're not just teachers. We wear a lot of hats. We're counselors, we're friends, we're coaches, we're mentors, we're business partners. Like they say, it takes a village to raise a child. We can't do it alone. We really rely on our parents. We rely on the business community. We rely on the volunteers who come in and work with the kids and help us out. By working together as a team, we're going to get these kids to the next level. Let's face it: These kids have a lot more demands on them than what

you and I did when we were in school. It's just amazing what they're expected to know, and by involving the parents and involving the business community, they're sharing in that, and the kids have a better understanding of what's going to be expected of them when they step out into the community.

■ **ATPE:** Do you have any messages specifically for math and science teachers?

■ **LEIJA:** We need to catch up. We've really fallen behind. All these other nations—China, India, Pakistan, Japan—have surpassed us. And we need to catch up, because all of our jobs are going overseas. We need to get kids excited about science again. We need to get kids excited about math again. And you know what, the U.S. has a history of bouncing back. I really feel deep in my heart that we're going to bounce back. It happened in the '50s with the Sputnik crisis; I believe it's going to happen now with the globalization crisis. A lot of teachers aren't comfortable with science. And you know, science is fun. You need to just sit back, enjoy it and have fun with it. Let the kids explore. I just asked

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"I AM A TEACHER"

NORTHSIDE (20) ISD HAS GIVEN EACH OF ITS FACULTY MEMBERS A POSTER FEATURING THIS EXCERPT FROM LEIJA'S TEACHER OF THE YEAR APPLICATION:

I AM A TEACHER. I have answered my nation's call to redefine the future. I have been entrusted to nurture and develop our country's most precious resource . . . our children. I am a coach, mentor, counselor and friend, fully prepared to take the necessary steps to make each student's dream become a reality. I will never waver from my course.

I AM A PROFESSIONAL, the descendant of a proud and honorable heritage. I hold myself to a higher standard because I am accountable to our nation, my community, the students and myself. I will always conduct myself in a manner that will bring credit to my field. I actively seek ways to sharpen my skills through continuing education and collaboration with my colleagues.

I AM A PARTNER. I work together with the community, business organizations, support agencies, administration and parents to ensure each student receives the quality education that many seek and relatively few realize. My classroom door is always open for my students and all who wish to catch a glimpse of how tomorrow's leaders are being prepared.

I AM A SHEPHERD. I openly reach out to and guide each student who passes through my door: rich, poor, privileged or disadvantaged. I nurture and encourage each student to achieve their full potential. My students will overcome life's obstacles to become successful.

I AM AN ADVOCATE. I encourage my students to take risks, think outside the box and always dream big. I help my students learn to be humble winners and gracious losers and work together as a team to achieve their goals.

I AM A CONFIDANT. I offer counsel to students who have nowhere else to turn in times of personal crisis. I offer the support, guidance and encouragement my students need to pilot them through their hour of darkness. I will never jeopardize that bond of trust. I gladly take on each of these roles to ensure my students have the tools they need to be successful in an ever-changing world.

I AM A TEACHER. I have answered the call. I cannot and will not fail.

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an unjustified risk should be subject to sanction. This rule is still highly subjective. What is enough justification? As an educator, if you are planning an activity, you need to carefully consider:

- (1) Whether any legitimate risk is involved;
- (2) If there is any way to make the activity less risky; and
- (3) If your ultimate goal justifies the risk.

As a real-life example, years ago an elementary school teacher decided that deep-frying letter-shaped doughnuts in her class would be a fun way to teach her young students their letters. Tragically, a student was badly burned when the deep fryer overturned in class. Although the teacher had the best of intentions and was and would still be immune from civil liability for the injury, it is highly possible that SBEC would, under this new rule, consider the risk unjustified under these circumstances. Were this to occur today, the teacher could face a complaint and sanctions.

Wine with dinner?

The rules also now prohibit an educator from consuming alcohol at a school event when children are present. An overnight field trip or University Interscholastic League (UIL) event would almost certainly be considered a school event, so that glass of wine or beer—even if it’s not shared with your kids—can get you into hot water. Stick to iced tea. ☹

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my kids yesterday: What is it that makes you want to come to school? What makes a good teacher? And they said, a teacher who doesn’t make us sit with books all day long. We want to handle things. We want to be exploring things. We want to look for the answers. And that’s what we need to do: Challenge these kids. It’s not a matter of having the perfect lesson; it’s a matter of having something out there to challenge them and make them think their way through things.

ATPE: Once a week, you perform a science experiment on your school’s televised morning announcements. How did you get to be “Dan, Dan the Science Man”?

LEIJA: When I first got here, our fifth-grade science TAKS scores were at the bottom of the barrel. About three years ago, Mrs. Matkin [Esparza principal Melva Matkin] asked me if I minded coming up to fifth-grade to see if I could jumpstart the science program. I asked her if I could do a quick-and-dirty science experiment that we could broadcast as part of the morning messages. I told Mrs. Matkin: My purpose is not to get them to learn it; my purpose is to get them excited about it. This is how the moniker got started: I’m also the science facilitator for the campus, and one morning I signed an e-mail “Dan, Dan the Science Man” to be funny. The next Monday, when they were introducing me on my morning program, the CIT [campus instructional technologist] just happened to say, “It’s time for Dan, Dan the Science Man.” The kids picked up on that, and it went from there. If I go into the cafeteria, I hear, “Hi, Dan, Dan the Science Man!” ☹

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Digging out another way

There is always another way, including one proposed by Texas Forward, a coalition of many groups including ATPE. Please visit www.txforward.org to take a look at the coalition’s plan and its possible consequences. It is a balanced approach to a balanced budget that includes using the whole Rainy Day Fund, considering new revenue options and funding current services while accounting for growth and inflation.

Reflection time

Once you have considered the facts and filed them away, reflect on the practices and policies that we believe are truly essential to giving our students what they deserve. We will have to make

some choices, all of them difficult. Which results do you want to achieve? Do you prefer the sacrifices and consequences of an all-cuts budget approach focused on shrinking government services and lowering taxes at the state level? Are you willing to make the sacrifices associated with funding current services and future growth? The choice is yours to make based on your own circumstances and your own values.

Regardless of that personal choice, it is your obligation as a citizen and professional educator to share your conclusions with those we have elected to make these decisions in our stead. If you don’t fulfill that obligation and don’t share your facts, reflections and solutions, then your choices, along with those of the rest of the public education community, will be limited. ☹