



# DURANT DEMOCRAT



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Matt Swarengin | Durant Democrat

**Ben Capers, co founder of the AEROS project, presents George Washington kindergarten teacher Vickie Piearcy with a plaque announcing she is a finalist for the Southeast Oklahoma Teacher of the Year award. Also shown is George Washington Elementary principal Valerie Crabtree. Capers visited the school Monday to make the surprise announcement.**

## Piearcy named regional TOY candidate

**BY MATT SWEARENGIN**  
matt@durantdemocrat.com

George Washington Elementary School kindergarten teacher Vickie Piearcy has been named a finalist for Southeast Oklahoma Teacher of the Year by The Aeros Project.

Ben Capers, co-founder of The Aeros Project, visited her classroom Monday morning to make the surprise announcement.

Piearcy, along with the other 19 finalists for the award, will attend the April 27 awards ceremony and banquet in McAlester where the Southeast Oklahoma Teacher of the Year recipient will be announced and the recipient will receive \$1,000 for their classroom.

Late last year, the school district named Piearcy the 2022-2023 Teacher of the Year for George Washington. GW principal Valerie Crabtree was pleased to learn that Piearcy is now a candidate for Southeast Oklahoma Teacher of the Year.

“We are excited to have Vickie Piearcy, a kindergarten teacher, represent George Washington Elementary School,” Crab-

tree said. “She is a dedicated educator and colleague who loves her students, school, and our community.”

Capers said The Aeros Project was started to recognize teachers and healthcare workers in southeast Oklahoma.

“We were looking for a group to get involved with and we couldn’t find one so we just decided to start one ourselves so it’s myself and Chris Plunkett, the other co-founder,” Capers said.

He said Aeros represents a 21-county region and the name comes from the Greek prefix for flight.

“We were imagining people that are going to greater heights and taking their organizations, their school, their community, business, whoever they are with, they are taking those places to greater heights and really going above and beyond what’s expected of them,” Capers said.

Nominations were received from more than 45 communities in the region.

The panel responsible

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Matt Swarengin | Durant Democrat

**George Washington Elementary School kindergartners in Vickie Piearcy’s class react after learning that Piearcy is a finalist for Southeast Oklahoma Teacher of the Year.**

### TOY

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for selecting the Teacher of the Year is comprised of Dr. Jay Falkner, President of Carl Albert State College, Dr. Janet Wansick, President of Eastern Oklahoma State College, and Dr. Thomas Newsom, President of Southeastern Oklahoma State University.

Capers noted that there have been teachers who delivered meals to children during the snowstorm, children who otherwise would

not have had food that day. Others have donated their time in the evenings as tutors and done volunteer work in their communities.

“We just heard a lot of great stories about a lot of great people and we felt like a lot of times, when a teacher is in the news, it’s not always for a good reason and we feel like that represents a tiny sliver,” Capers said. “It’s the minority of what is really going on out there so we wanted to help tell some of the good stories.”

# McAlester News-Capital

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## New program recognizes teachers



ADRIAN O'HANLON III | Staff photos

**MCALESTER TEACHER TINA STEWART** tears up as she is named an Aeros Project Teacher of the Year finalist.

By **ADRIAN O'HANLON III**  
EDITOR

Tina Stewart and Margie McElhany teared up as they received tickets naming them finalists for a regional teacher of the year award.

Stewart, a first-grade teacher at McAlester Public Schools and 30-year educator, said the recognition as a finalist for the Aeros Project's Teacher of the Year means a lot to her — and the future of her students remain her focus.

"It's amazing but it's not what I do for the kids, it's what the kids do for me,"

Stewart said. "That's why I'm here, because of the kids."

McElhany, a special education teacher at Puterbaugh Middle School, shared that sentiment.

"They always think that I impact them, but I'm the one that gets impacted the most," McElhany said.

The two McAlester teachers were named among finalists for Teacher of the Year through the Aeros Project.

Co-founders Chris Plunkett and Ben Capers said they started the program to recognize healthcare workers and educators —

receiving more than 50 nominations during the monthlong nomination window for the teacher program.

Plunkett said the top priority for the program is recognition for the teachers and a "thank you" from southeast Oklahoma.

"It's a 'thank you' from all of us back to them for everything they do," Plunkett said.

They started a website and sought nominations for teachers to be recognized in a 21-county area of southeast Oklahoma and received more than 50 nominations.

Committee members reviewed the nominations and will select an overall award winner to be named during a banquet in April at Downtown 312 in McAlester.

Each finalist will be recognized and allowed a plus-one and two administrators at the black-tie event hosted by Oklahoma news anchor Julie Chin and catered by Belt 40.

The Teacher of the Year will receive \$1,000 and an award.

"We feel like teachers are the most underpaid, un-

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ADRIAN O'HANLON III | Staff photos

**MCALESTER TEACHER TINA STEWART**, middle, is named an Aeros Project Teacher of the Year finalist with local attorney Tony Edwards, left, and Will Rogers Elementary Principal Preston James presenting her the plaque.



ADRIAN O'HANLON III | Staff photos

**MCALESTER TEACHER TINA STEWART** tears up as she is named an Aeros Project Teacher of the Year finalist.

### Program...

<< **CONTINUED** from Page A1

der-recognized, over-worked people we could think of and we couldn't think of anybody more deserving than these folks that give it all for our kids," said Capers, whose mother was a teacher.

"Teachers didn't used to have to deal with all the things they have to deal with now and so with these increased responsibilities they're having to pay more out of their own pocket to fund their own classrooms, which is insane," he added. "But seeing the way things have changed, I know it's that much harder on teachers."

Tony Edwards, with Edwards and Patterson Law offices in McAlester, said the law office wanted to get involved to help support educators.

Edwards, a Stuart High

School graduate, said his father was a longtime teacher and principal at Stuart, while his law partner, Matthew Patterson, has several family and friends involved in education.

"Education is very strong in our partnership and the way we look at things," Edwards said. "Teachers have a tough job. Especially in this day and age, and we're aware of that and we just want to do everything we can to help some of them."

Josh Jacox, with Crossland Construction, said the company always tries to help the communities in which it has projects.

Crossland is constructing the \$35-million middle school and event center on track for the projected May 31 completion date.

"We're very big on supporting communities and building communities," Jacox said. "One of our

mottos is 'community builders' so we're real big on not just building a project with a district, but engulfing ourselves in the community."

McElhany was nominated multiple times for the MPS Teacher of the Year award and won it in 2017.

She said programs like this give teachers deserved recognition.

"For education to be recognized in any way is huge," McElhany said. "This is a great, great compliment."

Stewart teaches first grade at Will Rogers Elementary in McAlester and said the school's team works well together.

She said seeing children have a lightbulb moment motivates her to do everything she can for them and to be recognized is an honor.

"I never dreamed after this many years that something like this would come



ADRIAN O'HANLON III | Staff photos

**MARGIE MCELHANY**, left, is named an Aeros Project Teacher of the Year finalist with Crossland Construction representative Josh Jacox presenting her with a plaque.

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The Eufaula

# Indian Journal

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this edition

McIntosh County  
2023  
Business  
Directory



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## Nominations being accepted for first Aeros Awards

*Group to honor teachers and police and others*

JERRY FINK  
MANAGING EDITOR

McALESTER - Ben Capers, who works full-time in marketing at the McAlester Regional Health Center, believes that a lot of deserving people don't receive the recognition they deserve.

"You don't see much good

news, especially teachers and law enforcement. If they're in the news it's not for something good," he said. "There's a void there."

He and a group of colleagues want to fill that void.

To that end, they started The Aeros Project and the Aeros Awards of Excellence

to recognize individuals in Southeast Oklahoma who are taking their organizations, businesses and communities to greater heights.

"There are no organizations honoring top achievers in this area. We see it in bigger cities, but not around here," Capers said.

The Project plans to honor teachers, law enforcement officers, first responders, business people and others with an award at two ceremonies each year.

The first awards, for teachers and officers, will be handed out on April 27 in McAl-

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## AEROS

from page A1

ester during a ceremony that will include dinner. A second set of awards, for healthcare workers and others, is planned for the Fall.

Finalists will receive a crystal award.

"The overall winner in education will receive \$1,000 for classroom supplies and the law enforcement officer will receive \$1,000 for police gear," Capers said.

The Aeros Project is

made possible through corporate sponsorship and volunteer board members.

Nominations for deserving teachers and lawmen are now being accepted. To make a nomination visit the website [www.aerosawards.com](http://www.aerosawards.com) or e-mail [info@aerosawards.com](mailto:info@aerosawards.com). For more information call 918-470-9268.

"This is not necessarily just people great at their job, but those

who go that extra step, like a police officer who recently drove a healthcare worker to work through the snow," Capers said.

**According to the Aeros Project website:**

Recipients of an Aeros Award possess what we call 'the Aeros Spirit'. Those with the Aeros Spirit persist in the face of adversity. They adapt when a crisis arises. They overcome seemingly insurmountable

obstacles, lift up those around them, and excel where others fall short.

In Greek, 'aero' is a prefix that relates to air and flight. "

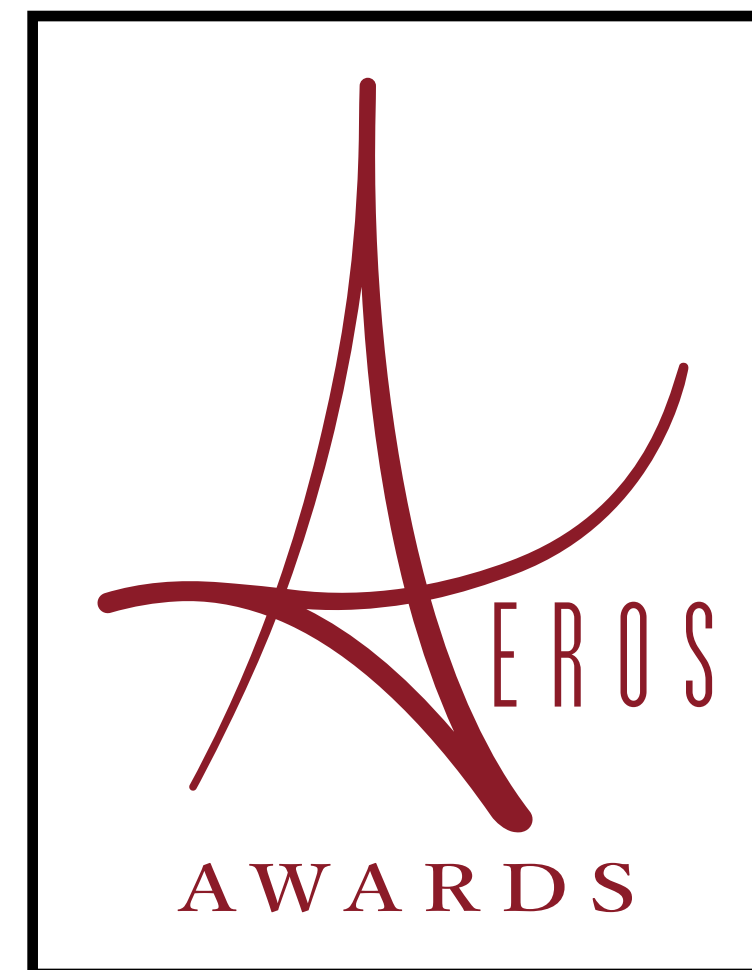
It was these concepts that inspired the idea of the Aeros Spirit. First, we consider the principle of air. While the air around us cannot be seen, when pressure is applied, it can reshape the earth's surface in the form of wind. It is relentless, and when prop-

erly channeled, it can power entire cities. And of course, breathing clean, fresh air is vital to our survival.

Air is also a crucial element in regards to taking flight; our second principle of the Aeros Spirit. Whether we think of birds, balloons, kites, or airplanes, none could travel without the air in and around them. Without air, a plane's engines have no combustion which generates thrust.

The thrust of the engines generates lift, the force of the solid plane contacting the fluid air. And when that force overcomes the weight of the plane, it takes flight.

Similarly, those with the Aeros Spirit are reshaping their organizations and communities with their relentless pursuit of excellence. They stand tall and lead when confronted with a crisis. In short, they are the best of the best.



Aeros Awards ceremony will be April 27 in McAlester.

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# Pauls Valley Democrat

Wednesday, April 12, 2023

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## Teacher steps into spotlight

Pauls Valley Junior High English teacher Courtney Green has been selected as a finalist for the Southeast Oklahoma Teacher of the Year award, presented by the Aeros Awards of Excellence.

Green, along with the other 19 finalists for the award, is set to attend the April 27 awards ceremony and banquet in downtown McAlester.

The Southeast Oklahoma Teacher of the Year recipient will be announced that evening and receive \$1,000 for their classroom.

Two members of the Pauls Valley public school administration will also be in attendance that evening at the black tie affair.

First United Bank of Pauls Valley is sponsoring Green and

the PV administrators the night of the awards.

The Aeros Awards of Excellence were created to recognize individuals in Southeast Oklahoma who are taking their organizations and communities to greater heights, and their inaugural awards ceremony is focused on honoring the top educators in the region.

“We believe that teachers are among the most underpaid, overworked, and under-recognized workers in our society,” said Ben Capers, co-founder of The Aeros Project.

“We trust them with the educational development of our children and we wanted to find a way to thank them for their tireless efforts.

That’s why we creat-

See STEPS page 7A



First United Bank President JD Bostic congratulates PV Junior High eighth grade English teacher Courtney Green after she was named a finalist for southeast region teacher of the year.

## STEPS

Continued from page 3 ed the Aeros Awards; to show these excellent individuals that their selfless works are not going unnoticed.”

Capers and co-founder Chris

Plunket are calling on all schools in the 21-county region to nominate their teachers who embody the ‘Aeros Spirit.’

“We received nominations from over 45 communities, and

the stories we heard were nothing short of uplifting,” Plunkett said.

“From one teacher who delivered food during a snow storm to students who would have other-

wise gone hungry, to another who volunteered her time in the evenings and on weekends, tutoring students who were struggling to master difficult math concepts. We have been

so inspired by these educators.”

The upcoming awards ceremony is made possible by generous corporate supporters of education in Southeast Oklahoma.