

DeKalb Neighbor
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Heart and soul



At left, Suttiwan Cox, principal at Path Academy, talks about the outdoor pond in the school's courtyard. Below: Malcolm Strong, 12, plays the drums during his music class at Path Academy.

Stephanie Bolt/Staff

Principal brings joy to refugee community

Suttiwan Cox, founder and principal of Path Academy, opened her three-minute comment to the DeKalb School Board Nov. 1, with a tear-filled passionate plea for a three-year charter renewal.

Referring back to the 1973 student demonstration in her homeland of Thailand that left 64 students dead, Mrs. Cox explained to the school board where her passion to open Path Academy was birthed.

"I remember the buildings were on fire; there was blood in the street. I ran and hid under a butcher's rack in the market and a soldier came by and all I could see was the barrel of his gun scraping the ground," she said. "I hid there until it was quiet, and that's when I decided if a human can create hell on earth, I can create a little piece of heaven, no matter how small."

The Brookhaven charter school has a student population of 18 different nationalities

and after going through that short experience, Mrs. Cox said she has a better understanding of what her refugee students went through so she can better prepare them for where they need to go to over-



Now some 30 years later, Mrs. Cox believes she has the chance to create her little piece of heaven on earth for 208 fifth-, sixth- and seventh-graders at the only public school in the county geared toward college preparation for students of that age.

"I believe teachers have more to offer a student if they concentrate on one subject. So, our students change classes like high school," she said.

"But my students always tell me they have no life because of their schedule and I tell them, 'Me neither.'"

Mrs. Cox, the mother of two grown children, said she spends so much time at the school that her husband Bruce quit his job to come work for the school to spend more time with her.

Path Academy students take math, social studies, English and physical education from 7 a.m. to

4:15 p.m. weekdays and attend Saturday school twice a month from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. for enrichment classes like photography and African drumming.

Despite the long hours she puts in with her students, the 55-year-old principal still finds time for a part-time stand-up comedy career, appearing in the Punch Line comedy club's video.

"When I first started the school three years ago, I was renting a hall with four classrooms from Yeshiva Jewish School. And the children had to eat kosher food for lunch and they tell me, 'Suttiwan, your school [is] so screwed up, the children [they] have accents, the principal has [a] heavy accent and they eat Jewish food,'" Mrs. Cox said, reciting a joke from one of her sets about her beginning days with Path Academy.

However, Path Academy now rents a building from Oglethorpe University, complete with a small library, playground, music room, gym, classrooms, computer room and courtyard.

Mrs. Cox, who taught at DeKalb County schools for nine years, decided to choose colors for her school to reflect what she thinks matters the most in life.

"Our colors are red and gray — red, which is the color of the heart and gray the color of the brain — because it takes both to be a good human being," she said.

Now that Mrs. Cox has received charter approval for the next three years with the provision to maybe add an eighth grade next year from the school board, she is free to work on her long-term goals of adding a high school.

"I met my husband while he was teaching for the Peace Corps, so I changed my citizenship four years ago. That way, when I retire from education, I can join the Peace Corps," said Mrs. Cox, who added she would get a job doing stand-up comedy on a cruise ship if the Peace Corps does not work out.

Information: (404) 846-3242 or www.pathacademy.org.