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## No ordinary day to mourn no ordinary schoolteacher

Classroom becomes an homage to a teacher who lived life at full throttle.

The day was over and most of the students had gone home from what was probably one of the hardest school days of their young lives. Her eighth-grade classroom at Highview Middle School in New Brighton, the scene of tears and hugs all day, was just as beloved teacher Jodi Maurer-Knudson left it -- a now silent homage to a life lived full-speed and without reservations.

The room was empty of students, but not of emotions, or the ideas she held dear.

A collage hung in the corner, put together by her husband, Joe, featuring photos and artwork by her kids, Max and Sam. A sign on the wall said, "Equal Rights are not special rights." Another at the front of the room above her desk said, "How do you live your life when nobody's watching?"

Maurer-Knudson, 38, or "Mrs. M-K," as everyone called her, died suddenly over the holiday vacation of unknown causes. Monday was the first day back for students and

colleagues, and there was a noticeable pall as students moved through the hallways. Some chose to remember her, others just tried to get through that first class without her vibrant personality, her firm hand and her constant support.

Just outside Principal Heather Timmons office, 13-year-old Araceli Renteria hugged teacher Mary Doroff, a tear rolling down her cheek.

"I'll be here if you need me," Doroff told her.

The school did what it could, bringing in counselors, allowing students to grieve alone or together. But these are teenagers, full of emotions and questions, so it wasn't easy.

"This is really a tight-knit school," said Timmons, who is serving her first year as principal. "Because of Jodi's personality, a lot of students are really close to her. I've been in education for 12 years, but I've never met anyone like her."

That has made the loss more difficult, but it will make the healing easier. A Facebook page in Mrs. M-K's honor had more than 1,400 entries, most telling about how the teacher helped them through tough times, encouraged them and just made them feel

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better about themselves.

Those students will never forget the kinetic energy in the classroom, the way she sang "the Friday song" at the end of each week or how she played the kazoo on their birthdays, or the tattoo on her ankle that read: "I am part of all I have met."

Renteria will not forget the day she didn't feel like eating lunch. Mrs. M-K asked if something was wrong, or if she needed money. Renteria said no. "So she went and made me popcorn," she said.

"She pushed us, but not in a bad way," said Drew Wojchik, 14. "She was just very special. She always used to tell us: 'The best way to predict the future is to change it.'"

Timmons said that at a time when teachers find it easier to simply remove disagreement and controversy from the classroom, Mrs. M-K challenged students to discuss and confront their feelings and opinions. When a student uttered a homophobic slur, she called him on it and discussed it in class. "Everything was a teaching moment," Timmons said. And Mrs. M-K was somehow "able to break through the hard shell" of tougher kids.

"She was real, and she was honest, and the kids responded to that," Doroff said. "When you left her presence, you felt like you were a good person."

Doroff said young parents are often engaged in silent "parent wars" where they try to outdo each other. "She had no time for that, yet she and Joe are the best parents we know," Doroff said.

Students said you didn't leave the class, or the relationship, at Mrs. M-K's door. Noah Mattio-Garcia mentioned he was reading the novel "Atlas Shrugged," so Mrs. M-K asked to borrow it so they could discuss it. "She understood you a lot when you were having a bad day," he said.

A day like Monday, when Highview Middle School mourned the loss of a teacher it loved, but its students came a little closer as they talked about how Mrs. M-K was living proof of the mottoes she hung on the classroom wall. That includes the one above the door that students saw as they left the room.

It said: "Life's Too Short to be Ordinary."

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