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Lady of Victory teacher awarded for exceptional work



Viola Devine. Ashif Jaffer Award recipient Viola Devine, left, meets with the award's namesake Ashif Jaffer Monday evening during the Toronto Catholic District School Board's annual awards ceremony at the Catholic Education Centre. *Photo/KRISTEN JAVIER ERIC HEINO*

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Viola Devine has truly been heaven sent for her multiple exceptionality pupils at York's Our Lady of Victory Catholic School.

For a decade of dedicated service both in and out of the classroom, Devine was recognized by the Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB) in its annual awards ceremony on Monday, May 3. For her work with elementary children who have multiple exceptionalities, she was honoured with the Ashif Jaffer Award for excellence in special education and teaching support.

She was reached at Our Lady the morning after the awards ceremony exhausted but in good spirits.

"I was so proud of myself and excited too," said Devine. "I was definitely humbled. I know there are a lot of deserving people and support staff that put so much of their time and effort into these kids."

Work with her group of four to eleven-year-old students is a little different in Devine's classroom. In order to qualify for entry, a student must be identified as having more than one exceptionality such as Cerebral Palsy, Autism or a developmental disorder.

Educating these students can be hectic on a good day, but Devine's intervention does not end when the bell rings. Often invited home for dinner with the family or for celebrations, she gets to know her students' families in order to better relate to their lives.

When not putting in extra hours doing extracurricular coaching at the school, she is also involved with the spiritual lives of students. When parents are unable, Devine volunteers to take students to mass on Sundays. Every Christmas she also volunteers to serve as a liaison between the Parish and the school to organize a campaign called Our Lady's Gift. She helps to purchase gifts for children who otherwise would not be fortunate enough to afford them.

All of that might be overwhelming for many people, but for Devine it is a privilege.

"The kids are just so much fun. It's a fantastic group of exceptional kids and I wouldn't get that same experience from a regular classroom," said Devine.

After being secretly nominated by her vice principal, Devine was taken by surprise when she got word that she had actually won the award. She had never knowingly been nominated in the past and certainly didn't expect to win.

During the two hour ceremony, she received congratulations via webcast from Archbishop Thomas Collins. She also had the privilege to meet the award's namesake, Ashif Jaffer, who has Down Syndrome and is currently enrolled in Ryerson University.

Before heading back to her class of enthusiastic students, Devine tried to explain where she finds the energy to remain so dedicated to her job and her pupils.

"It's actually a vocation for me," said Devine. "I love it, I enjoy it, I live it, I breathe it. This is my life."