

# Central Valley district educator named Washington state's 2021 history teacher of year

## Teacher recognized for work with Spokane Tribe

By Nina Culver

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Decades of teaching experience and a passion for local history has led Central Valley School District teacher Leslie Heffernan to not one, but two state-wide awards for excellence.

In July, Heffernan was named the Washington State 2021 History Teacher of the Year and in August she was presented with the Governor's Award for Excellence in Teaching History in partnership with the Washington State Historical Society.

Heffernan said her first reaction was to be puzzled about why she had received the awards. "I think it's just the surprise," she said. "This summer was really fun for me. It's such an honor."

Heffernan is beginning her 21st year as a teacher this fall, 20 of those years in the Central Valley School District. This year she's doing something new, teaching sixth-, seventh- and eighth-grade history in the new Central Valley Virtual Learning Middle School. "I thought it would be really fun and interesting."

She has often been a middle school history teacher, though most recently she taught for two years at Mica Peak High School and was the district's K-12 social studies coordinator.

It was during her time as a district coordinator that Heffernan did the work that she believes got her nominated for

the awards. State law requires school districts to collaborate with local Native American tribes when teaching about local history, she said. Heffernan took to the task with a gusto.

"I was really motivated," she said. "I'm very, very interested in tribal history. Tribal history is U.S. history."

Heffernan reached out to Spokane Tribe elder Warren Seyler, who has spent more than a decade giving presentations on tribal history and giving tours of local historical sites. "He really came alongside me and mentored me," she said. "We wrote large units of study for third, fourth and seventh grades."

She also got involved with Friends of Spokane House, a local historical re-enactment group, in order to learn more. "This history is so rich and complicated and worthy of teaching to students and teachers in our area," she said. "We try to incorporate the Coeur d'Alene Tribe. Their traditional homelands kind of cross over, especially in the East Valley area."

Children in the lower grades learn about the local tribes and their lives now. Students in seventh grade, however, learn more about the history of the tribes, including the battles fought against U.S. Army troops, she said.

Heffernan has noted with interest the recent efforts to rename Spokane streets and buildings originally named in honor of George Wright, a military officer who

employed often brutal tactics against the local Native Americans tribes. Fort George Wright Drive was renamed Whistalks Way in honor of a woman warrior who opposed Wright. The Mukogawa Fort Wright Institute, an extension campus of Mukogawa Women's University in Nishinomiya, Japan, changed its name last year to the Mukogawa U.S. Campus.

"What's really exciting is, things have really changed," Heffernan said. "This topic is so current and so relevant."

The curriculum that Heffernan and Seyler created is available online for any teacher to use, but Heffernan doesn't want to take credit for it. "My first reaction was, did they realize I didn't do this myself?" she said. "I'm just the collaboration between professionals."

At the end of the day her main goal was to create something useful that would capture the interest of students, Heffernan said. She thinks the curriculum she helped create has done that.

Heffernan said that her students often think of history as something that happens in other places, not in their hometown. She's able to show them that important history did happen here and provide them with an introduction to local Native tribes. Some students have virtually no knowledge about local tribes, she said.

"I think a lot of kids have a lot of misconceptions," she said. "I think helping kids uncover those misconceptions is really fun to watch."

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