

For Immediate Release:

### **Teacher Honored for 30 Years of Service**

“Tolerance is seeing with your heart instead of your eyes.” So reads a banner at the front of Marty Wiggins’ social studies classroom at St. Gabriel’s Catholic School. As a teacher for its opening year in 2000 he chose this light-filled and plant-friendly classroom as his homeroom. The quote on the sign imparts the main lasting ideal he feels social studies can teach young people. This year after over thirty years in elementary education, Wiggins will teach the graduating class of children who began first grade when St. Gabriel’s opened its doors.

These kids know him well; Mr. Wiggins has become something of an icon at St. Gabriel’s. When you see him in the halls easily bantering with his middle school students it’s obvious he’s well-liked and respected. In his humorous correspondence with parents in gathering photos and yearbook orders, one sees a creative communicator. By his planning and organizing of “the Big Sweat” (essentially a goofy Olympics event for fourth through eighth graders) students appreciate a clowning friend. But when discussing his teaching career he is serious about the effect he knows he makes on young people both in and out of the classroom.

Ever since he can remember Wiggins has wanted to teach; even to make his own school. The years seem to have molded that purposeful young student into the dedicated, sincere, thoughtful and stable teacher he is today. He admits to a high school nickname ‘Stoneface’ for the somewhat stern brow he’s always had, but he speaks with an undercurrent of warm humor and an unmistakable twinkle in his eye.

Most of us are lucky to have an important teacher like Mr. Wiggins in our history. Growing up in a military family, Wiggins went to 15 schools over 13 years, so he’s seen his share of educators. There were several teachers in his life that made an impression on him, but the standout was one from whom he never took a class. “My Mr. Wiggins was Mr. Smith”, he says of the student council moderator in high school. Mr. Smith, a Vietnam veteran, pointed out Marty’s sense of humor and convinced him to run for class president in 1970. He won, and learned the value of a teacher who saw in him what he himself hadn’t before.

Mr. Wiggins has that quality of drawing out students and making them think their own original thoughts. For example, in the quiet moments after a quiz he might have the students answer a question on the back of their papers. This week it was “what is something that you want to do in your life that you haven’t done yet?” His genuine enjoyment of the self-revelations of these young teenagers seems to express his level guidance not only pertaining to the curriculum and the day’s lesson, but of the development of their character.

“The main lessons the children teach me”, he says, “are all wrapped up in awareness; awareness of how we communicate with each other, the effects of our words and

expressions on others, and awareness of how we show love, respect, caring and kindness.”

Wiggins is a natural teacher of his values in his personal life, too. As the father of two adult professional children in their twenties, he still cooks them Sunday dinner a couple of times a month. He relates the story of the time his then high school aged son purchased sleeping bags and delivered them to the people sleeping under the South Mopac bridge near Lamar. Wiggins may have been concerned for his son’s safety, and certainly proud of the boy’s kindness; but he could not have been surprised at the gesture.

As one who quietly practices what he teaches, Wiggins serves our community at large as well as his own family and the families and students at school. Back in the late 80’s Wiggins helped spearhead a Sunday morning hot meal program at the Community of Christ Church on South Lamar. He gets up early and helps prepare a hot breakfast, complete with scrambled eggs and venison jalapeño country gravy and biscuits for about 150 hungry neighbors in south Austin. As a testament to his influence, every month three of his eighth grade students meet him at the church to contribute their helping hands to the effort. He said he encountered a little resistance from some parents at first, but eventually most realize this service matches the spirit of St. Gabriel’s. He has volunteers every month.

Matt Purell, a student who’s spent a couple of Sunday mornings cracking eggs states, “making breakfast is a fun way to do some service. Mr. Wiggins makes jokes and everyone is really nice.” Many seventh and eighth graders agree their social studies teacher is one of their favorites. Will Stanka explains, “He gets us into the class by telling good stories.” Ryan McGonigle adds, “he makes everything easy while being fun at the same time.”

As Marty Wiggins proves true, a complete education includes more than learning cities on maps of distant continents. Sometimes it includes discovering the continent within.