

Taylor-Eliopoulos has an unwavering focus on education



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Since she was a small child attending Halmstad Elementary School, Heidi Taylor-Eliopoulos has known what she wanted to do with her life.

“It was kind of evident since second grade, when she said she wanted to be a teacher,” said her father, Jon Taylor. “And ever since that time she was focused on teaching.”

When she was in middle school, Heidi would sometimes circle around the kitchen table where her brothers, Craig and Adam, were doing their homework. She would look over

their shoulders, poised to help them with the spelling of a word or a math problem.

“I don’t know that too many kids start out at that young age and follow through with it, but she did,” her dad said this week.

That determination, combined with a habit of pouring herself into her work, has been rewarded. On Tuesday when students begin classes for another school year in the Chippewa Falls School District, Heidi Taylor-Eliopoulos will be their superintendent.

The announcement in early June may have surprised some people. It’s not often school districts have a chance to promote someone from within who was a product of the same school system, and rarer still when they actually follow through and do it. But it didn’t surprise her parents one bit.

“Chippewa’s a good district, and it’s a district a lot of people would enjoy coming to. So we didn’t know with her experience if she would have the opportunity,” Jon said. “However we did know that what she set her mind to, she was going to do. And she’s always been that way.

“When she told us she had gotten the job, I can’t say we were surprised. I guess I wasn’t surprised, because she is just that focused.”

A happy child

Heidi Taylor grew up on the southern edge of what was then the town of Hallie, on land her father had lived on his entire life. Jon was raised on his parents’ 20-acre hobby farm, and when he married Judy — she grew up only four miles away near the Stardust Drive-In in Hallie — he bought an acre from them, built a house and raised his family.

“She was always very happy, but she was very shy. Very shy,” Judy said of her daughter’s elementary years. Despite that, teachers began to see her as a leader.

“I think it was Mrs. Luedtke who said although she was shy, she didn’t let anybody push her around. She was confident,” Jon said. “She wasn’t the kid in class who always had her hand up. But if someone pushed her or challenged her, she wouldn’t back down.”

Jon said they never pushed their kids in a certain direction. “We gave them a lot of opportunities to do things that they would like, and we wanted them to try different things and find their niche.”

Whatever Heidi did, she was all in and gave “150 percent,” said her mother before pausing and sharing a laugh, something she does often. “Except at T-ball.”

Sports were not Heidi’s thing, but she was plenty involved. She sang at Zion Lutheran Church and for the Chi-Hi Harmonics group and at weddings, participated in plays and as a cheerleader.

“You know she loved school,” Judy said. “She loved being in school, she loved the extra-curricular activities, and I think that’s what she wants to give the kids today the opportunity to have. So many kids just go to school and go home, but she wants kids to get involved and to see what’s out there.

“She wants kids to enjoy school, and not look at it as a hassle or a job.”

Dream come true

Heidi is living not only her dream, but her dad’s as well. When he was growing up, Jon wanted to be a teacher and a coach.

“But I didn’t feel that I could ever afford to go to college, so I got a job. That’s what you did in those days,” he said.

It was a good job. Jon served on the Chippewa Falls Fire District for 30 years, the last 19 as a battalion chief. Until retiring in January 2013, Taylor would race off to fires whether he was on-duty or off, and the professional example he set was noticed by his children, including Heidi.

She became a teacher directly out of UW-Eau Claire, and fittingly for a person who isn’t prone to sitting still, she has been on a fast track ever since. She pursued her Master’s degree at UW-Superior within her first two years of teaching with the idea of becoming a principal. Jobs at Eau Claire North, Durand and Stevens Point led her straight back to her hometown eight years ago and a school she had attended as a student.

“That was her dream job, coming back to Chippewa,” said Judy.

Suddenly, she was the assistant principal at Chippewa Falls Middle School, and she wasn’t even 30 years old.

Three years ago Taylor-Eliopoulos was promoted to principal, and at the same time worked toward her Ph.D. She received her doctorate from the University of Nebraska a week after Brad Saron stunned many and announced he was leaving Chippewa Falls after only two years as superintendent for Sun Prairie.

The top job was open, and the 36-year-old was qualified. “That’s exactly what she went to school for at Nebraska,” Judy said.

“We didn’t encourage her to apply, and we didn’t discourage her,” Jon said. “We just told her, ‘Heidi we have confidence in you, and if you choose to do this, we’re behind you all the way.’”

Even when she was teaching in Stevens Point, Heidi would make the trip home nearly every weekend. So being able to stay home in Chippewa for the superintendent opportunity she realized would most likely come somewhere else has made this opportunity all the more special.

Heidi lives only a mile or so down the road from her folks, with her husband George, a sergeant with the Eau Claire Police Department.

The couple does not have children, and if they did, Heidi doubts she would be in the position she is now. But in a sense, they have more children than anyone.

“She really considers the school district and the kids her kids, and she always has,” Judy said. “When she talks about the kids at the middle school, it’s like ‘her kids.’”

Taylor-Eliopoulos has always had a love for children. Once she was confirmed, she taught Sunday school. She helped out with vacation bible school and the kids’ choir. And she has three nieces and a nephew that she adores.

Time has come

The Taylors have been on the receiving end of a lot of well-wishes since their daughter became superintendent.

“People that we know, and some not even all that well, have come up to us and congratulate us,” says Jon.

Among the qualities that will serve her well, says her father, are her intelligence, her personality, her attitude and her enthusiasm.

“She has an incredible amount of enthusiasm for her job, and she has a genuine love for this district and these students,” he said.

They are understandably proud of their daughter — of all of their children, they are both quick to add — and have no reservations about her being the right person for what can be viewed as a daunting task.

“For us, it’s kind of scary to think your daughter is going to enter such an important position,” her dad said. “However, knowing everything she has accomplished to this point and knowing how focused she has been, we felt very confident that if she decided to do this that she would be successful.”

Which is why Judy and Jon Taylor are perhaps more excited for the start of this school year than any students.

“Right after she was hired she was in her office working 11- and 12-hour days, putting in an incredible amount of time just preparing herself,” Jon said. “I’m excited for the students to come back and for the teachers to see how things are going.

“I think it will be a great year.”

Role Models

Heidi Taylor-Eliopoulos is quick to admit that her parents have always been a big part of her identity. While athletes and entertainment figures are bandied about as role models, she believes a child's parents are their first and greatest influence.

So ask her about Jon and Judy Taylor and she doesn't hold back.

"My parents taught me that I could be anything in the world that I dreamed to be, as long as I was willing to work for it. They taught me to strive to leave the world a better place than I found it. They pushed me to believe in my dreams and helped me develop the drive to obtain those dreams," she says.

They also drove home the importance of family and community, which drew their daughter back to Chippewa. "Living a life of service in Chippewa Falls has always been my goal. Growing up, that's the life I knew.

"My parents are truly amazing human beings. I would not be who I am without them. Every single day, I do something that I got from them."