2023 NSPRA National School Communication Awards
Publications and Digital Media Excellence Awards
Category — Excellence in Writing

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The article titled “Daegu Elementary student self-portraits decorate White House Christmas trees” was shared on DoDEA Connects — the Department of Defense Education Activity’s internal news portal.
DoDEA’s 2022 Teacher of the Year Rachel Guilfoyle, alongside 21 other state teachers of the year, visited the White House Dec. 11, 2022 to see their students’ art on display as part of the White House holiday decorations.

Guilfoyle’s fifth grade students at Daegu Elementary in South Korea had the unique opportunity to contribute self-portraits that were transformed into ornaments. They are part of over 400 student ornaments in the State Dining Room, which is themed We the Children — designed to ensure children see themselves in the White House holiday display.

Guilfoyle’s class was also one of the few selected to have some of their ornaments adorn the president and first lady’s private tree.

“When I first walked in, I was in awe. My mouth literally dropped! This experience was inspiring because it was student-centered. Many of the decorations in the White House this year were done by students from across the United States, territories and
DoDEA,” said Guilfoyle. “As an educator, to be able to walk into the State Dining Room of the White House and see hand-drawn self-portraits of students is something I will never forget, and an experience I never thought I would have for myself or my students.”

Guilfoyle’s students couldn’t contain their excitement when they were told about the project.

“There were many conversations about how to complete the self-portraits and many painstaking and lovingly diligent re-dos because the students wanted their self-portraits to really reflect who they are and how they want to be seen in the world,” said Guilfoyle. “This project was a testament to their creativity, commitment and sense of community. I am so proud of my students, and all the students who were bold to be reflective about who they are and share that with the world.”

“I also had the heart-felt and humbling opportunity to view the Gold Star Family Holiday trees at the White House which were lovingly decorated by volunteers to honor fallen service members,” said Guilfoyle.

Each star on each tree was engraved with the name, date, and military branch of the service member.

“As a surviving military spouse and as the 2022 DoDEA Teacher of the Year, I believe it is important to understand the sacrifice of not only the military-connected students and communities we serve but also those we have lost while on active duty.”
This unique opportunity was made possible by a U.S.-based charitable community organization and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), which runs the National Teacher of the Year Program. Nominations for the upcoming DoDEA Teacher of Year opens Jan. 9. For more information, visit the DoDEA Teacher of the Year website.

Rachel Guilfoyle (back center), alongside 21 other state teachers of the year, in the White House State Dining Room.