WHEN ANN HUGHES STARTED TEACHING PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN 1985, SHE HAD 800 STUDENTS ON HER NEW BERN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ROSTER AND 150 OF THEM HAD DISABILITIES.

“I HAD A STUDENT WITH SPASTIC CEREBRAL PALSY, A STUDENT WITH MUSCULAR DYSTROPHY WHO USED A WHEELCHAIR,” SHE SAID. “I DIDN’T EVEN THINK ABOUT TRYING TO SEPARATE THEM FROM THE OTHER STUDENTS.”

It was ten years after the passage of the 1975 federal Education for All Handicapped Children Act, which said all children with disabilities had a right to special education — and, importantly, that they should be placed in the least restrictive environment and given maximum opportunity to interact with other students.

For the young Ms. Ann, starting her job as the school’s only PE teacher two weeks after her college graduation, there wasn’t really an option but to include every student in every phy ed class and make modifications as needed.

Then, as now, she started from a stance of inclusion.

Then, as now, her no-nonsense, why-can’t-we attitude shaped how she educated students of every background and ability level.

Start where you’re at, she would teach them, and I’ll help you grow stronger.

“I just taught them,” she shrugged. “They’re children. They’re just like you and me, they just function differently.”

Since 2006 she has been the Adapted PE teacher for New Hanover County Schools, a role where she delivers physical education to students with disabilities across the district and coaches other phy ed teachers on how to include — and challenge — every student.
At the International School at Gregory, she established a unified PE class where gen ed classmates are partnered with students with disabilities and they do every activity together.

Thursday at Gregory she was a powerhouse in a gray and teal jogging suit, leading the students in a rapid-fire sequence of dances and exercises and working up a sweat right alongside them.

*In, out, side to side, turn around, here we go again!*
*Bend your knees!*
*To the left! Stand up tall!*
*Let’s march!*
*Stomp your feet – that’s a jump. One foot and then the other. We’re going side to side, we’re going to drop our hands, and we’re going to turn around. Forward 2-3, back 2-3.*

A student who’s struggling with direction gets walked to a designated spot to wait.

A student with a visual impairment who was reluctant to participate gets walked out to join the group.

Then, because it’s St. Patrick’s Day, Ms. Ann belts out in song, “I’m looking over a four-leaf clover/ that I overlooked befoooore.”

It feels like an apt song for a group of students who for so long were overlooked and underserved, and for an instructional area that is often underappreciated or misunderstood.

“There’s so many functional skills and lifelong skills that children learn in physical education,” she said. “We are a curriculum area. We are a core academic subject. Some might not think so, but we are.”

A freeze dance activity, for instance, might look and sound like chaos to an outside observer, but it’s teaching students to stop and go on command.

“So many of our students have processing delays when you give them a direction,” Ms. Ann said.

“What if someone says, ‘Stop! There’s a car coming!’ That’s a functional skill for them to learn to stop. Bending and stretching are functional skills. We sit down, we stand up, we learn to wait and listen.”
It all benefits them in their lives outside of school, she said, and it all takes practice.

Until last year Ann was the only Adapted PE teacher in the district, but NHCS has added two positions filled by Ryan Hauck and Alyssa Sciaudone.

For Ann, nearing 40 years of teaching and pondering retirement, it’s reassuring to finally have a team to pass the torch of Adapted PE to.

Together they cover at least 18 schools, sometimes as a team leading a unified class like at Gregory, sometimes providing push-in support for individual students or small groups.

The goal, always, is to give every child as much of an inclusive phy ed experience as they can.

“Inclusion is not just because they’re in there; inclusion is they’re learning right alongside you,” Ann said. “We might have to go a shorter distance or take one or two turns less, but we prepare and include them from the very beginning.”

At the end of Thursday’s class, every student has been pushed to exert themselves, and Ann has them circle up.

They go around the circle and each buddy shares what their partner did well that day.

A student who uses a gait walker and a speech device to communicate did a great job throwing and catching, her classmate says.

A student with visual impairment ran hard and danced well.

Another friend did a great job playing on the scooters.

After each announcement the whole group claps, and the students are visibly bouncing with excitement at being seen and acknowledged.

While the world outside might point out their limitations, Ann said later, every class with her is a celebration of what her students' bodies are able to do.

“Good PE,” she said, “is adapted PE.”