

Retiring teachers look back on long careers

By **MARK SPIVEY**
STAFF WRITER

PLAINFIELD — Robert A. Segal remembers the time a group of fellow teachers, some of whom he didn't even know, graciously pooled their own sick days to donate to him when he suffered a raquetball accident that knocked him out of work for weeks and ultimately left him blind in one eye.

Tiffany K. Corbett re-

members the student who went on to become CEO of a high-profile company, then went out of his way to ensure that the firm annually donated \$1,000 to the charity golf tournament she established to fight breast cancer, against which she continues to fight a personal battle. Paul J. Pannone remembers teaching no fewer than four students who would go on to become city school board members, in-

cluding three who serve on the board now. Jean Williams remembers fulfilling her lifelong dream of becoming a teacher, then working at perfecting it for more than four decades.

It's a treasure trove of memories the quartet has accumulated in a combined 165 years on the job, as four of the longest-tenured teachers in district history will be retiring together at the end of the current school year.

All four spent at least 40 years here.

"It's going to be difficult," Williams said of finally retiring. "But I think that's why we stayed so long — we enjoyed it."

Humble beginnings

Segal, a music teacher at Cedarbrook Elementary School, Williams, a sixth-grade mathematics teacher at Emerson Elementary

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STAFF PHOTO: MARK SPIVEY

Four longtime teachers in the Plainfield school district, (from left) Paul J. Pannone and Tiffany K. Corbett, both Plainfield High School social studies teachers, Robert A. Segal, Cedarbrook Elementary School music teacher, and Jean Williams, a sixth-grade math teacher at Emerson Elementary School, all are retiring at the end of the school year.

Retiring

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School, and Corbett and Pannone, both Plainfield High School social studies teachers, recently assembled for a joint interview to reflect on their careers.

All four keenly recalled their first days on the job — with Segal and Pannone naming their initial starting salaries as \$6,000 and \$7,000, respectively.

Corbett said a 35mm film projector came apart in her hands on her first day of work as the principal of her school at the time hurried out of the room to avoid having to try to help fix it. Pannone said he missed his first day.

"I had spent summer in Europe, and I overslept," he explained.

Segal said his first year featured a confrontation he'll never forget. Shortly after the 1967 Plainfield riots, a student stood up during the middle of the lesson and boldly announced he intended to punch his teacher in the face.

"The kid was as big as I am, which is not that difficult," Segal said, laughing. "I told him, 'I'll let you take the first punch, but after that, it's self-defense.'"

A starting contest ensued, and the student ultimately relented, returning to his desk as the lesson continued, Segal recalled.

All four teachers went on to enjoy rich careers. Segal taught at several schools before winding up at Cedarbrook, and after drifting from classroom to classroom for almost four decades (with, at times, "no room, no desk and no place to put my coat," he noted), he finally got to enjoy his own room for the past four years.

Williams spent 23 years at Clinton Elementary School before spending her last 18 years at Emerson.

And Corbett and Pannone worked at the high school under what Corbett said have been 23 principals and 20 superintendents — including current Principal Brian Bilal, a former student of Corbett's.

"I am so glad I got the opportunity to work alongside of Mrs. Corbett and Mr. Pannone as a peer," Bilal said recently. "If I didn't get this opportunity, I would have never known what made the two of them really great at what they do. Also, it would have taken me a little longer to figure out that a small thing such as consistency ... makes the difference between good and great."

Fond memories

"Both of them are great teachers, and even more important, great human beings," Bilal added.

As time went by, new school years brought new challenges.

Corbett recalled being petrified of her first experience operating a DVD player in front of a class, and described with pride a

2001 project through which she and a group of students created a historical research portfolio on city natives who died in Vietnam, an initiative that led to emotional meetings with 12 families of soldiers who were killed in action.

Pannone and others recalled trying to get through to students who showed promise despite coming from tough backgrounds, and the thrill of seeing some of them succeed.

"That's the thing we really like to do. If there's just one kid you can impact, it's a really, really satisfying feeling," Pannone said, singling out one of his current students, a junior growing up in a city public-housing complex who has shown what he said is remarkable writing ability.

In one recent project, he said, the student drew a series of what he said were stunning parallels between Niccolò Machiavelli's 16th-century masterpiece "The Prince" and the music of the late rap artist Tupac Shakur.

"I told her that it made me cry," Pannone said unflinchingly. "She is one of

the best writers I've ever had."

The retirees agreed on many topics, but had conflicting takes on retirement. Williams plans to travel, starting with Hawaii, but admitted that the last day of school will be difficult for her. Segal said he plans to continue his cantorial work counseling young Jewish people and also continue to compose his own music ("I've got to keep busy, 'cause I can't watch daytime TV," he explained).

Pannone said he's "ready" to move on and also plans to travel.

But Corbett said she is trying to take things one day at a time. The widely beloved teacher said she has Stage IV breast cancer but is receiving treatment in New York City and is committed to fighting the disease.

"This is so bittersweet for me. I couldn't have asked to be part of a better staff all these years," Corbett said, tears welling in her eyes. "I'm doing everything I can to live."

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