

Denise Presnell

“Going the extra mile” does not even begin to describe the way that long-time school social worker, Denise Presnell goes about her work. Whether she is sitting in the floor of a family’s house trying to figure out a way to get the heat turned back on, or she is leading a child and family team meeting and talking about strengths and goals, there is never any doubt that Denise devotes her entire self to this work, and she is incredibly gifted at it.

Denise is masterful at connecting resources for children and families. Her easy-to-be-with, comfortable personality inspires trust in even the most skeptical families, and this trust leads families to feel comfortable telling Denise what their needs are. As soon as she knows the needs of the family, Denise is making phone calls to connect resources for them.

Perhaps one of the most organized persons I’ve ever met, Denise has a “to do” list for each family, and she never fails to cross things off the list and make things happen for families.

Denise goes where ever the call of duty asks her to go. This may mean that she drives to Deep Gap to pick up a family to go grocery shopping. It may even mean organizing a graduation party, as she did a few years ago for a young man, who, though not expected to graduate, accomplished this feat. She tracked down and invited his childhood mentor, old after school leaders, and other people who were important in this young man’s life and everyone had a celebration, complete with food and a book which everyone signed and gave to the young man to give him inspiration for the future.

Denise was a HUGE part of this young man’s success. For many, many years, she made sure he was at school, had help with homework, received mentors and after school care, and knew that she was watching, supporting, and believing. Because this young man knew this, he went to school, did his homework, and refused to drop out even when he had the chance. He knew that Denise would be calling his family, even driving out to his house if that’s what it took to make sure he finished school and had hope for his future. This is only one example. There are literally countless students who have had similar experiences with Denise.

Denise seems to never tire. She has one of the most challenging jobs of anyone in the youth care profession. Every day at multiple schools, she works with kids who are in poverty, who are being abused, who are making poor decisions. She looks at them with a non-judgmental eye, which earns their trust, and then she sets the bar high and shows the kids the steps to take to reach their goals.

After 15 years of working with some of the most in-crisis youth in Watauga County, Denise is as dedicated and effective and hopeful as the first day she began her job.

In my six years of working with High Country youth, I have met many, many dedicated and talented individuals in the field, but Denise surpasses them all, and is clearly in a league of her own. I hope she can, through this award, receive some well-deserved recognition for her work.