



Catherine "Gigi" Bethke, a career educator, was chosen as the namesake for Katy ISD Elementary 39 which opened in August 2016



Bethke developed reading intervention programs to help students develop a love for literature

# BEYOND BETHKE

**Katy ISD namesake and career educator, Catherine Bethke, continues to fuel a love for reading and passion for learning in students**

*Written by Lacey Kupfer Wulf | Select photography by Anetrius Wallace*

Catherine "Gigi" Bethke has devoted her life to young children, literacy, and reading. She developed reading intervention programs and a literacy library to help all students feel the same love of reading she has, allowing her to reach students beyond her kindergarten class. Carrie Lowery, principal of Catherine Bethke Elementary (CBE), adds, "When students are comfortable with literacy skills, their world is opened up for learning geared toward their passions." It is little wonder why Bethke was chosen as the namesake for Katy ISD Elementary 39, which opened in August 2016.

As the sixth of 12 children, Bethke had plenty of practice teaching - helping her younger siblings with homework, and reading aloud with them. That love of teaching never faded. She says, "Even now at Bethke Elementary, my enthusiasm for teaching is renewed when I look into the beautiful faces of the children, hear their sweet voices, and feel their arms around my waist."

### A Special Gift

Bethke's reading programs included more than just reading books, "We read daily affirmations, recited jivy jingles to help them with word attack skills, and sang songs to help them with comprehension in addition to standard reading practice." These other activities not only helped students improve their reading skills, but also built students' confidence in their ability to learn.

"She has a gift for making everyone feel special," adds Lowery. As Bethke's former student and special education resource and in-class support teacher at Bethke Elementary, Christin Puyol adds, "When you go through your teaching certification courses, they often ask you to picture your favorite teacher and think about what you liked most about that class. I always pictured Mrs. Bethke's class because I felt so welcome."

### Celebrating Success

Through the reading intervention program REACH (Reaching Empowers All Children), which she created and coined, Bethke has learned how to help those students in first through fifth-grade who have negative feelings about reading and learning in general. She says, "An educator needs to take the time to build a trusting relationship with kids so they will be willing to put forth their best efforts."

She also believes that preventing these negative feelings from developing in the first place is the best course of action. "In the beginning it is necessary for the teacher to accept and celebrate small successes because they lead to



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reading gains." Bethke's example and experiences show that this teaching philosophy works.

### Bethke Bisons

"When I was told that a school would be named in my honor, I felt blessed, humbled, and amazed," Bethke says. "I feel a huge responsibility to help CBE become another successful Katy ISD campus." She is already impressed by the strong leadership, dedicated teachers, and parental involvement. "I am very proud of this beautiful school and I am delighted to have a permanent link to Katy ISD."

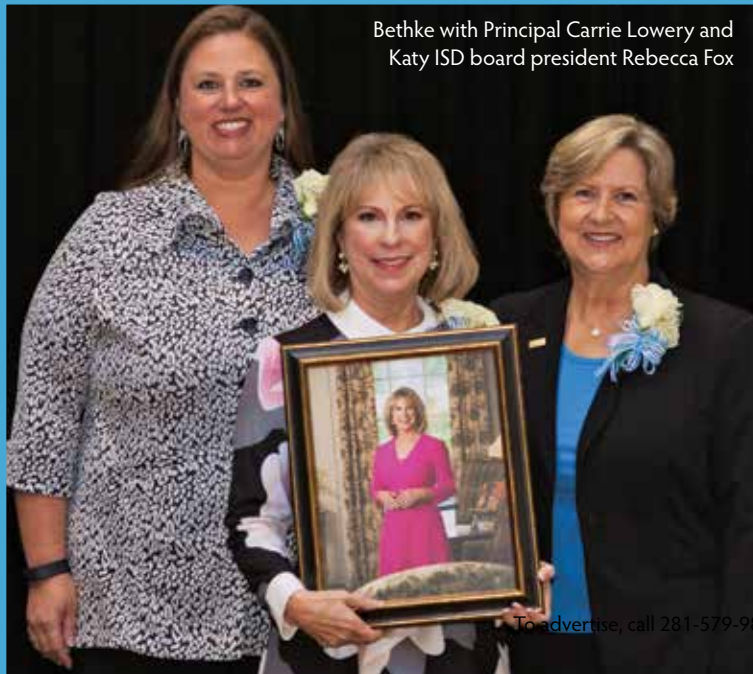
Even the kids have had to adjust to the new school name and mascot. Bethke says, "It is not unusual to see and hear some of the sweet kindergarten or first-grade students eagerly waving and smiling at me as they call out, 'Hi, Mrs. Bison!' or 'Hi, Bethke Bison!'"

### Lasting Contributions

Even after retiring in 2012, Bethke continues to volunteer at Alexander Elementary, where her two granddaughters attend school, and Bethke Elementary three times a week tutoring, reading to classes, and teaching junior achievement. "Every time I hear her read a book to students, it reminds me of the excited feelings I had in kindergarten during story time," Puyol adds. Bethke also works as a substitute GT proctor for Katy ISD. "I still want to be involved in a school setting as long as I feel I can contribute effectively," she says.

For Bethke, teaching has many rewards. "When struggling readers beam with pride because they can read a word today that they didn't know yesterday, or when they leave the classroom hugging a book they can read, it is extremely gratifying," she says. "I think my favorite is just four simple words: I love you, teacher." **KM**

Bethke with Principal Carrie Lowery and Katy ISD board president Rebecca Fox



## BETHKE BULLETS

- 31-year career in Katy ISD
- Started career at the original Williamsburg Settlement Elementary School
- Served as a teacher leader in the opening of Winborn Elementary, Alexander Elementary, and Creech Elementary
- Honored as a Campus Teacher of the Year at Creech Elementary and Katy ISD District-wide finalist in 2006