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Yuma's Liz Colton is Arizona Rural Teacher of the Year

By Sisko J. Stargazer Sun Staff Writer
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Arizona Superintendent of Public Instruction Kathy Hoffman (left) smiles for a photo with Liz Colton (right), Arizona Teacher of the Year.

Photo Courtesy of Adriana Alvarado

“Because rural teachers get by with less, to do the same work as urban teachers.”

That’s why rural teachers deserve special recognition, says Wes Brownfield, executive director of the Arizona Rural Schools Association.

Each year during its annual conference in Flagstaff, ARSA presents prestigious awards for Rural Teacher of the Year for each Arizona county and most importantly, the Rural Teacher of the Year for the state.

And Friday night, Sept. 16, was Yuma County's shining moment when ARSA announced that Crane Middle School STEM teacher Elizabeth "Liz" Colton is this year's Arizona Rural Teacher of the Year.

"They announced my name, and I couldn't believe it. I was just shocked, and I started welling up with tears," Colton said. "And I was surrounded by everybody I love: my husband and my son, my principal, Mr. [Ryan] Tyree, and, of course, Dr. Mike Hoffman, our assistant superintendent, was there. Tom Tyree and Deb (Raeder) from ABEC were there, and Miss [Kaitlin] McGill, my work bestie, too.

"That whole table was full of everybody I loved, and it was just absolutely amazing to share that with them and to represent Yuma County that way. I'm really honored. There's so many wonderful teachers in all of Arizona. And rural teachers, you know, I feel like there's a special spot because they work extra hard for a lot of things."

When Colton was named the state's Rural Teacher of the Year, ARSA had read aloud from the nomination letter that Crane Middle School Principal Ryan Tyree had written.

Among the many praises Tyree shared with the Yuma Sun about Colton, he noted that Colton has put Yuma on the map through her programs and community involvement.

"She has built connections within the local community in Yuma," he said. "At Crane Middle School, our partnerships have grown by 365% and donations totaling over \$35,000. She is an active member in Yuma County's middle school career exploration program known as Yuma Arizona Business and Education Coalition (Yuma ABEC). Mrs. Colton is a critical asset in the Yuma ABEC project and has contributed to creating an exemplary model for the entire state of Arizona.

"Putting Yuma on the map, through her STEM program, students develop a deep understanding of collaboration, critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity and innovation through challenge-based learning. She is growing our community of change-makers."

For Colton, the reality of the win hasn't completely set in yet but she's expressed deep gratitude for the support of her family and her family at the Crane School District.

"Being able to be named that... like, I can't take all the credit," she said. "My family supports me, of course, and then my school district, Crane. And then Yuma ABEC and all the businesses in the community that really support teachers, that really support us teachers. That's what makes our job easier so that we're able to do these amazing things with our kids. It's so cool to bring (this award) home and be able to say, 'Yay! Something for Yuma, my community that I love so much.'"

As the winner of the state title, Colton received a \$1,000 cash prize and an all-expense paid trip in October to the annual National Rural Education Association Convention in Wisconsin.

She's also now in the running for National Rural Teacher of the Year. ARSA Executive Director Wes Brownfield noted that seven past Arizona Rural Teachers of the Year had won the national title. Colton could be the eighth, and she's excited for what comes ahead.

During her ride back home from Flagstaff, however, Colton said she's most excited to see her students next.

"I can't wait to go home and show my students!" she said. "Last night, my (former) students were sending me messages on Instagram. That really meant a lot to have former students of mine reach out to me."

Thankful for all of these surprises, Colton traveled back to Yuma with excitement and plans to "enjoy the moment, enjoy the ride."

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