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the top local news
from around
the Portland area.

CITIES & SUBURB

Real Life Celebrating our community's people and places

Behind the shadow

A teacher doles out carrots that serve as rewards to guide challenged students toward realizing their potential

By ANGELA CARA PANCRAZIO
of The Oregonian staff

A plastic dump truck. A purple teddy bear. A board game. Shoved neatly in a custodial closet, right by the heavy-duty floor waxer.

The closet is next to Martha Han's classroom in Rigler Elementary School. It's her private storehouse, a place she keeps the carrots she uses to lure hard-to-reach minds into the world of learning.

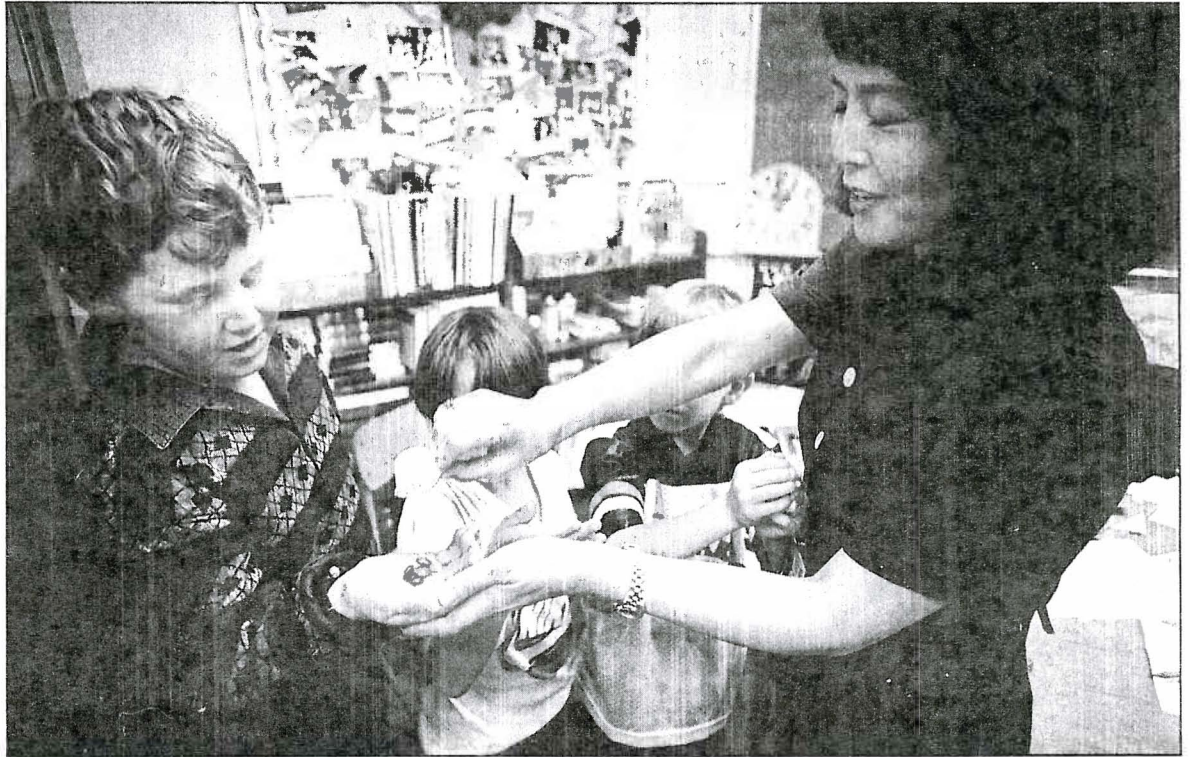
Dustin Wood steps into the classroom. "Am I late? Sorry I'm late, Miss Han." He slips into his chair next to Sharita Tolliver, 10, and Matthew Linn Saechao, 9. All three are enrolled in Han's class for children with learning disabilities or attention deficit disorders.

Han sits across the table from the children. She places four tiny plastic cubes in front of each young scholar. The cubes are carrots. If the children concentrate and do their work, they keep the cubes. The cubes translate into pennies, and the pennies lead to Han's private closet.

To keep the cubes, the children must obey a sign on the wall that says: 1) Keep hands and feet to self. 2) Follow directions. 3) Be nice to others. 4) Do my best.

They open their books to read. They carefully trace each word of each sentence with a pencil's eraser tip.

Sharita moves through a paragraph with her pencil. She encounters the word "thick" in the phrase "thick brown leather glove."



ANGELA CARA PANCRAZIO/The Oregonian

Martha Han tips a reward for hard work and good behavior into the hand of Jeremy Fifield, a second-grader at Rigler Elementary School.

Han has taught her and the others how to read with emotion. So Sharita hangs onto the "thick" a little longer than "brown," "leather" and "glove."

The glove in question happens to be a baseball glove. So Han asks them to write about sports. "I'll give you extra pennies," she says, "if you describe a piece of sports equipment."

The hour ends. But Han hands over no actual pennies. Instead, she picks up a rubber stamp embossed with Abraham Lincoln's likeness and presses that four times onto each student's folder.

The pennies add up. And the prices in Han's closet aren't terribly high. When children save enough, they can buy something from the closet.

Sharita saved for a stuffed toy, a yellow dog she keeps on her bed. And she bought a flashlight for her younger brother.

A younger child, Naomi Samantha Kelly, 8, earned enough for a pink teddy bear. She bought her mother jewelry and her father scary books.

The rewards help challenged

children feel good. They span ability and achievement. They help the children find their way in an impatient world.

Han provides the treats herself. On weekends she scrapes around garage sales, gathering books, stuffed toys, jewelry. Discards.

This past spring Han shared her creative teaching strategy with other educational resource teachers in Portland Public Schools. They became interested, too. So did parents.

Han became a piece of a larger project: The Shadow Project, named for the character in "Peter Pan" who has lost his shadow and

wants one again, just like everyone else. The project raises money to offer the rewards Han and other teachers use in their teaching. Parents and other supporters donate or raise money for the project.

Han says her students are like Peter Pan: frustrated because something within themselves doesn't work the way they want it to.

She hopes they will find their shadows in her closet.

Reach The Shadow Project at 777-6632 or 3732 S.E. Nehalem St., Portland, Ore. 97202.