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## **Thornton Fractional District 215 Staff Members Receive Prestigious Awards**

**Lansing, IL:** TF South guidance counselor Marcia James and TF North math teacher Erik Perez were recently acknowledged for their exemplary work with students in Thornton Fractional District 215. In November, Ms. James won the Illinois Guidance Counselor of the Year Award from the Association for Child and Adolescent Counseling in Illinois (ACACI), while Mr. Perez won a Symetra Heroes in the Classroom award in December.

The Illinois Guidance Counselor of the Year Award honors a counselor exhibiting a commitment to serving children and adolescents in Illinois with best practices and exemplary standards. Ms. James has over a decade of experience serving as a school counselor in the south suburbs of Chicago, during which time she has instituted many groups and programs, as well as training numerous school counselor interns now working at other schools. She coordinates mentor programs and sponsors peer mediation in addition to her other counseling responsibilities. Ms. James has graduate degrees in both school counseling and educational leadership and is currently pursuing her doctoral degree in counselor education at Governors State University while working full-time as a school counselor at TF South. Her dissertation research is focused on the mental health needs of students. Much of Ms. James' work this school year has been geared toward creating a Wellness Room for use by students and staff alike for well-being activities including mindfulness, meditation, peace circles, and restorative justice practices. TF South principal Jake Gourley notes, "Ms. James has put her dissertation work into real-world practice. The entire campus is benefiting from her post-graduate studies and her level of dedication to improving the lives of others."

The Symetra Heroes in the Classroom Award, presented by Arthur J. Gallagher, is a community program that recognizes 16 Chicago-area teachers during the Chicago Bears season for outstanding leadership and instructional skills. Criteria for the award includes a teacher who makes a real difference in the life of students, goes above and beyond in day-to-day responsibilities, and helps students build life skills. Mr. Perez teaches Algebra and Geometry, coaches Cross Country, and sponsors the Dreamers Club at TF North. Principal Brian Rucinski, who nominated Mr. Perez for the award, notes, "In the classroom, Mr. Perez impacts students' lives by giving them confidence in themselves to excel in his class and others. I have seen examples of students that completely changed after not being on track to graduate when entering his class. In cross country, I have seen students that struggled to find a sense of belonging in the school find their place through cross country. In the Dreamers Club, Mr. Perez has worked with students to show them how they can apply for college and financial aid. I have had multiple students come back from college, tell me how well they are doing at school, and explain how

they never would have gone to college if it wasn't for Mr. Perez." As part of the Heroes in the Classroom Award, TF North received a \$2000 donation, and Mr. Perez got tickets and a VIP sideline experience to a Chicago Bears home game.

Dr. Teresa Lance, Superintendent of District 215, noted, "I am so pleased that Ms. James and Mr. Perez have been recognized for their outstanding work. Their level of commitment and dedication to students and our district is an inspiration."

**About Thornton Fractional High School District 215:** District 215 serves the students of Burnham, Calumet City, Lansing, and Lynwood at Thornton Fractional North High School, Thornton Fractional South High School, Thornton Fractional Center for Academics and Technology, and Thornton Fractional Center for Alternative Learning. The mission of District 215 is to provide diverse learning opportunities that inspire all students to become life-long learners who contribute to their community.

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