

OLD SCHOOL

Apache Elementary began as a one-room adobe schoolhouse in the early 1910s. Although the building has been rebuilt and the technology has changed, it's still a one-room schoolhouse, where Palma Hudson provides a traditional education to 10 students ranging from kindergarten to eighth grade.

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ALITTLE PAST 7 A.M., the sound of the approaching school bus rouses Palma Hudson from her desk at Apache Elementary School. Wearing blue jeans and Justin boots, Hudson tucks a section of long, chestnut-colored hair behind her ear and makes her way to the door.

Hudson has been up since before first light, beginning her 30-mile commute just as the sun crested the hills. It's a drive urban commuters might envy, past a few scattered houses and cattle grazing on monsoon-fed grasses, rays of sunlight fanning out between flat-bottomed clouds.

Lines gather at the corners of Hudson's eyes, her face breaking into a smile, as the first boy emerges from the bus wearing cowboy boots and a knitted cap.

"Good morning!" she beams from the doorway. "How are you, buddy? It's Thursday!"

Hudson teaches 10 students in kindergarten through eighth grade at this one-room school in Southeastern Arizona, near Douglas. It's one of only a handful still operating in the state. The school building has been rebuilt and the technology has changed, but Hudson upholds the values that have been part of the school for more than 100 years. Her students learn a poem a month, along with phonics, cursive and classroom rules that include honesty, kindness and sticking together. And they benefit from a small class size, close relationships and the personal attention that researchers recognize as being important to a good education.

Students file through the door, bringing the smell of the outdoors with them. They shuffle into a back room to hang up their backpacks. Soon, they have gathered on a piece of carpet, surrounding Hudson and teaching assistant Tanya Guilliam.

Because the students live in an isolated area, Hudson believes it's important to expose them to the wider world. So every morning, they begin the day sharing news stories. And each one contains a lesson.

A thin, blond-haired boy in the second grade reads haltingly, in a quiet voice, about scientists using technology to uncover new facts about a Revolutionary War battle. His older sister looks over his shoulder, helping with hard words.

"Who fought in the Revolutionary War?" Hudson asks.

Teacher Palma Hudson greets (from left) Olivia Blalock, Bodie Blalock and Landen Humble as they leave the school bus and enter Apache Elementary School, one of a handful of one-room schools still operating in Arizona.



ABOVE: Jeremiah Hudlow-Chavez (left) and Ben Blalock peer into an opening in the Apache Elementary School wall to inspect a spider.

RIGHT: Palma Hudson (left) goes over an English assignment with Olivia Blalock.

An eighth-grade girl with fair skin and dark hair raises her hand. “The British and the colonists,” she says.

“And why were they fighting?” Hudson prods.

Hudson shares her story last. It’s about a Phoenix boy with an undisclosed illness who is collecting coins to help build a theme park for kids fighting life-threatening diseases.

“It makes you think how fortunate we are,” she says. “And about this boy who is fighting a very serious illness, but instead of thinking about himself, he’s thinking about other children.”

HUDSON’S FAMILY HAS DEEP ROOTS in Arizona. Her mother, a nurse, was born in Cochise County, where Apache Elementary is located. Hudson was born in the Salt River Valley. Her father raised chickens in South Phoenix but moved the family to Santa Barbara, California, to pursue

real estate when the egg market declined. When Hudson was 11, the family moved to Costa Rica, staying for nearly five years before returning to Arizona and settling in Willcox. “Talk about a culture shock,” she recalls.

In Costa Rica, Hudson became fluent in Spanish, but the credits she earned didn’t transfer smoothly to the U.S. It didn’t help that she hadn’t had a formal English class in five years.

“So I was there a year, took the GED and went on to college,” she recalls.

Teaching was an unexpected calling. Hudson taught a church preschool class and found she had a talent for it. She ultimately earned both her bachelor’s and her master’s degrees in education.

She was working as a first-grade teacher in Douglas when she heard the teacher at Apache Elementary was retiring, and she requested an interview. That was 13 years ago.

AT LUNCHTIME, students line up at the sink to wash their hands — the smaller kids standing on a wooden step, the bigger kids helping. Then they take turns using one of three microwaves to heat up meals brought from home. Hudson keeps ramen noodles, crackers and juice packs on hand for emergencies.

After lunch, students head outside to play dodgeball. Hudson stores a variety of balls in a blue tub in the ladies' room, which doubles as a textbook storage and supply closet, stocked with everything from paper napkins and Kleenex to disinfectant wipes.

Hudson watches the game from the doorway, periodically calling out, "Below the waist!" Whatever game the kids play, they play together. There don't appear to be cliques. No one gets left out.

Students bring animals for show and tell: hamsters, lizards, snakes. They have more problems with bears than with gangs, and, being out of range, Hudson has never had to confiscate a cellphone.

"It's almost like family," says Chet Miller, who's stopping by the school. His daughter has attended Apache for five years. "These kids treat each other like they're brothers and sisters," he says.

When Apache Elementary's district was organized in the early 1900s, Apache was a ranching community and school was conducted in an outbuilding on the Snure family's ranch. The community built a one-room adobe schoolhouse in the early 1910s.

Today, the small community consists of four or five households. The current school building was constructed in the early 1960s. It overlooks Apache's boarded-up general store, with the monument commemorating Geronimo's surrender visible in the distance.

The school is still surrounded by ranchland. It was ranching that brought Hudson to the area 21 years ago, when her husband took a job at Mud Springs Ranch. The Hudsons eventually bought the spread.

In the past, students' families were mostly involved in ranching. That's true of only one student today. In recent years, parents have included scientists working in Portal, mechanics, motel owners, Border Patrol agents and sheriff's deputies. But they remain close to the land.

"Most of the kids are outdoors kids," Hudson says. "They like critters. They appreciate nature."

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LEFT: The Apache Elementary School class poses on the playground. From left to right are Olivia Blalock, Kyden Wood, Ben Blalock, Landen Humble, Bodie Blalock, Gracie Blalock, Amanda Miller, Moz Mullen, Jake Mullen and teacher Palma Hudson. The youngest student, Jeremiah Hudlow-Chavez, had left for the day.

BELOW: Ben Blalock stretches his legs beneath his desk.

RIGHT: While waiting for Palma Hudson to finish working with another student, Jeremiah Hudlow-Chavez reads to his classmates.

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There is, however, a bat that's taken up residence in the tetherball pole. It sometimes surprises students by shooting out the top in the middle of a game. And while most students are unfazed by snakes — for two years, the class kept a hognose snake named Weedwacker — roller-skating is another story.

"Most of my kids had never roller-skated," Hudson says of a visit to a skating rink during a trip to the state Capitol in Phoenix. Laughing, she recalls that the trip prompted one student's father to ask, "Do you think next time we can find an activity where we stay vertical?"

IN THE AFTERNOON, two girls sit quietly at their desks, working on iPads, while two boys quiz each other on spelling. At one end of the classroom, a kindergartner sits, coloring, at a desk next to Guillian, who is working with another girl.

Hudson sits at a table surrounded by four boys with bingo cards.

"Cover the vowel sound you hear in 'sit,'" she directs as the boys search their cards. "Cover the final spelling in 'lack.'"

The day passes in this way, with Hudson calling up a constantly shifting constellation of students and moving seam-





lessly from third-grade math to eighth-grade Arizona history. In between, she calls up students individually to go over work they've turned in.

Many of these students have other educational options. Some have been home-schooled. Several transferred from Douglas. Hudson spends a lot of time encouraging good habits and filling in educational gaps. Teaching multiple grades means students can work where they are academically, regardless of grade. And with a small class, Hudson can spend time with each student.

"Kids who are behind come here and excel," she says. "It's not because I'm a miracle worker. It's because they get the attention they need."

Parents also get involved, helping with projects and serving on the school board. Hudson generally sees 100 percent participation in school plays and programs, with the larger community turning out for potlucks at those events. And they're passionate about the school.

In 2014, the county school superintendent proposed closing Apache Elementary. Ninety people packed the school board meeting in protest. Some had no connection to the school. Many, such as Chet Miller, had long ties. A member of one of the area's original ranching families, Miller served as school

board president. His father attended Apache Elementary, and his grandfather was among the school's first students. "It's a wonderful school," he says. "And the history here. To let that go is shameful."

Surprised by the passionate outpouring, the superintendent quickly backed down.

ABOUT 3:15 P.M., students pile chairs on top of desks and gather up their backpacks. At 3:20, they file out, giving Hudson a high-five on their way to the bus. A few of them stop for a hug.

Hudson will spend the balance of the afternoon grading papers and preparing lesson plans. Even with a part-time teaching assistant and a business manager who doubles as custodian, there's administrative work to attend to, state testing to administer and meetings to coordinate, not to mention science fairs, field trips and holiday programs.

"I have to be a jack-of-all-trades," she says. "I'm the principal. I'm the superintendent. I'm the transportation director. If the lights go out, I call the fix-it man."

It can be a lot to juggle, she admits, and things can get messy. But it's a way of life that's increasingly rare, and she wouldn't trade it. **AH**