

**EDUCATION**

# A hero's welcome



Columbian fifth-grade student Mariah Grine gets a high-five from her cousin Chad Pompa, who she honored as her hero during the program.

## Fifth-graders honor their role models

**BY JON POMPIA**  
THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

As fifth-graders at Columbian Elementary School learned, genuine heroes are a lot closer to home than the stage, screen, playing field or history book.

A Living Heroes Project, spearheaded by school social worker Katie Gasset, helped open children's eyes to the fact that a hero "does not have to be a superstar. Rather, it's someone they know. Everyone has that person they look up to, and anybody can be a hero," Gasset explained.

Almost exclusively, the more than 20 students in Michael Palmer's class who honored their personal champions Thursday had to look no further than their own family circles.

Parents, siblings, grandparents and cousins were the overwhelming role models of choice, with Gasset herself and Principal Michelle Alcon Montoya also earning a tip of the hat.

One by one the boys and girls, several with charming twinges of stage fright, took to the podium to proclaim the attributes of their heroes,



CHIEFTAIN PHOTOS/BRYAN KELSEN

Columbian Elementary School fifth-grade student Adiva Tafoya gets a kiss from her grandmother Marvel Baca after explaining why Baca is her hero during A Living Heroes Project in the school's cafeteria Thursday.

aided by a slide show with photographs and personalized terms of endearment like "Keep

Calm Because I Love You Mom."

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As the presentations illustrated, it's the little things that make the biggest difference.

"My hero is my dad," said Thade Garcia. "Because he's been there for me when I needed homework help. He believes in me. I can talk to him. We spend time together playing games and watching TV. He supports me."

As far as Gabriel Escobedo Tafoya is concerned, Robert Armijo is "the best grandpa in the world."

In addition to serving two years in the Army, Gabriel let it be known that his grandfather "is a legend in football and baseball who tells me a lot about life. I've learned a lot from him.

"Grandpa, I am lucky to have you as a grandpa. Thank you so much for being there for me."

As for the amiable social worker behind the project, Destahny Ortega had this to say:

"Miss Katie is kind. She helps me when I get in trouble. She makes me laugh. She treats people with respect.

"Thank you for inspiring me, being there for me, making me happy and making me laugh."

Those honorees in attendance were called to the stage to be further rewarded with a hug, kiss

and presentation of a certificate of appreciation.

Like his charges, Palmer said he didn't have to look very far to find those who most impact him.

"I could not do a presentation with all the heroes I've had in my life because there's way too many of them. And a good chunk are sitting right here," Palmer said, motioning to the fifth-graders.

Fighting off a tear, Palmer continued.

"Every day they come in here and they bust their tail to improve themselves — and that is the most precious thing I could ever say about anyone. And in a city of heroes, it's so nice to have so many sitting here."

Chad Pompa, a native Puebloan, made the drive from Denver to receive accolades from his cousin Mariah Grine, who praised him as a hard worker and a good role model who offers encouragement and a helping hand.

"You have to be a role model to these kids," said Pompa. "Be a good person and do the right things. And I had some paid time off, so coming down for this was a great way to use it."

*jpompia@chieftain.com*