As we wrap up our year-long celebration of NYSTRS’ 100th anniversary, here is our third and final installment of NYSTRS Centennial Stories: a collection of reflections and photos from members for you to enjoy.

Visit NYSTRS.org/100 to see past issues and other centennial information.

Karen Salzano

“I became a teacher because I loved learning and felt I could share that with my students. I wanted to de-mystify subjects that proved troublesome to them and to break down concepts logically and sequentially. At the same time, humor played a big part in my classroom persona that my students enjoyed.

In 1995, I was awarded the A+ Teacher Award. It was a three-state contest (sponsored by several food companies) of over 800 entries in which students had to explain why their teacher was deserving of the title A+ Teacher. The big prize awarded to my family and my student’s family was an all-expense-paid vacation to Jackson Hole, Yellowstone Park, and Mount Rushmore.

An interesting tidbit in my career was a surprise visit from a student’s father who was a famous actor (on Broadway and TV). I knew the relationship between the two but never expected him to walk into my class unannounced. I was almost speechless!

Become a teacher because you have a genuine concern for young people and their needs. Know that many demands will be made of you but that the rewards you will derive from your efforts will be well worth it. You have the ability to shape and influence students’ lives, and there can be nothing more important than that. The life of a teacher is a life well spent.”

Karen Salzano retired in 2013 after teaching in Brooklyn and Plainedge Union Free Schools on Long Island.

Gary Wilcox

“I was a full-time driver ed teacher for the first half of my career. We always gave a final road test, similar to what the Motor Vehicles Department gives, at the end of the 20-week long semester.

One of my female students got into the driver’s seat to start her final road test. As she was sitting there, she kept looking at her feet and the pedals. I asked her if there was a problem. She stated: 'I hope you don't think this is a dumb question, but I forgot which is the gas pedal and which is the brake.'

There are always great moments, which make teaching very rewarding!

Our school had two full-time driver ed teachers. We saw just about every student in our school. After 14 years of teaching driver ed, my superintendent suggested I take a physical education opening in the junior high because schools were starting to cut driving programs. I did not want to take the chance of not teaching at Homer, so I took the job in physical education, which had been my major in college, and retired after 17 more years.”

Gary Wilcox retired in 2008 after teaching for 31 years in the Homer Central School District.

John Cocca

“I became a teacher because of the influence of a male history teacher and coach. I later became a principal and ran a program in which students could serve as Principal of the Day. Once a mother asked me to come to the house where her son was under the bed and refused to go to school. I did get him out and to school!”

John Cocca retired in 1992 from South Colonie Central Schools after a 33-year career.
Michele Heide Berman

“I wanted to teach since I was five years old, playing school and doing art with every play date I had! My first real paid job at age 15 was art counselor at the town recreation camp. I became camp director seven years later.

In 1973, I graduated from Hofstra University with a double major in elementary education (N-6) and art (K-12). I was determined to teach, despite the university telling us to change our major because there were few teaching jobs and the Vietnam War was raging. I obtained a job teaching third grade in Merrick, Long Island. It was a team-teaching classroom set-up, had an open classroom philosophy, and contained 60 children. I was excessed from the district every year for three years but kept getting rehired due to attrition.

I was then hired for what was supposed to be a one-year position as a middle school art teacher for the Rye Neck school district in Westchester, but I ended up teaching in Rye Neck another 37 years! I taught a variety of subjects, grade levels and curricula in different school buildings over the years. I eventually ended up working as an elementary art teacher for the bulk of my career. In addition, I created a humanities ELA curriculum, taught reading and writing support, became the district visual arts chairperson, was published in *Scholastic Art* and *Arts & Activities* periodicals, and was nominated for Disney National Teacher of the Year and Westchester County Teacher of the Year in the Arts.

In my 40 years of teaching, I have taught many thousands of kids. It was a joy to teach creative and higher level thinking and have my students make connections and experience the aha moments!

I have been retired now for eight years. When one is in a service career, it is the love of the job that fulfills you, not the monetary rewards. I loved my career!”

Michele Berman retired in 2013 from Rye Neck Union Free Schools, where she was known for her Pinpals art project in which children created original characters using recycled bowling pins.

Lee Bialer

“I was a class mother for many years. Then I started to substitute in different school districts. One day a principal asked me to take over a fifth grade class for a teacher who was going to be out for a long time. I said OK, but then I found out being a long-term sub required a degree in education. I had a liberal arts undergraduate degree from Queens College. I went to night school at Adelphi University, got my graduate degree and began teaching fifth grade.

I found I could be an excellent teacher. Each year I would do a big project. One year was about money; another year was about stamps. Each child would do research and write away for information. My class had to talk about what they had done before an audience of parents, friends, the principal, the superintendent, and other classes. The visitors were so impressed with each child, so the class heard they had done a great job. This gave the class new confidence!

I believe that when students do a good job, they feel proud about what they have done and then they will try to do more. When students are encouraged to try new things, their confidence grows!

Later in my career, the school needed a second grade teacher. Most of the fifth and sixth grade teachers did not want to teach second grade. I said children are children, so I took it. I found little second graders get restless later in the day. I was not going to scold them — they were just being children. So I decided to do something else to get them through a school day. What I did was I began to teach them French words, French songs, etc. Skip to many years later. A woman ran up to me, all excited to tell me: ‘Mrs. Bialer, I just had to tell you, because of you, my daughter is now a French teacher!’ This is a teacher’s reward.”

Lee Bialer retired in 1988 after 17 years teaching in the Connetquot Central School District on Long Island.
Letty Sustrin

“I sat down in front of my computer to write about my life as a teacher. Where do I begin? It’s like taking a trip down memory lane. My identical twin sister, Sheila (deceased in 2015), and I always knew we were going to be elementary school teachers. When we were three years old, we played ‘house’ with our many dolls, but soon our dolls became our students and we considered ourselves the ‘Twin Teachers.’

After graduation from Brooklyn College, we started to look for teaching positions. The Brentwood school system was building new schools at the time, and we were both hired to teach kindergarten in the same school. This was the start of 38 wonderful years teaching side-by-side in Brentwood.

We taught kindergarten for 18 years and later both became first grade teachers in another Brentwood school. We were known as a great team and were even named Brentwood’s Teachers of the Year together in 1978. We nurtured our students and I like to think we were surrogate mothers to them. To this day, I am still close to many of our former students.

We retired in 1998, but it was a very hard decision and we missed the children. We decided to go back as school volunteers. Someone once asked us why we never married, but we explained: ‘WE DID!’ We got married to our job. It became the main love of our lives.

One day, my sister and I started to discuss how we could continue to enrich the lives of children. We decided to begin writing children’s books. Our first book was The Teacher Who Would Not Retire. The book turned into a series about an older teacher who has many escapades with her students. I wrote five books with my sister and the sixth and final book of the series alone. When my twin passed away, I continued my involvement with schools, and I wrote another book called A Penny from My Sister.

I love being able to relate to children, charm them, and make them happy. In today’s world, children need to be able to laugh and enjoy life. I have had 61 wonderful, memorable years with the Brentwood school district. I am still looking forward to many more fruitful years as an active retired teacher!”

Letty Sustrin retired from Brentwood Union Free Schools in 1998 but continues to serve as a school volunteer.

Nancy T. Cupolo

“All I ever really wanted to do was teach kindergarten! When I was seven years old, I would conduct skits and performances for neighborhood children in our basement and ask my eight siblings to watch me sing, dance, and play school.

When I started college, I got a job working with a four-year-old boy named Stuart who needed assistance with walking on his own. I leaped at the opportunity to work with him, not knowing that my life would change forever because of a four-year-old’s inspiration, wit and humor!

I graduated with an undergraduate degree in nursery, elementary, and special education and later got a master’s degree in special education. Working with Stuart inspired me to teach children with emotional disturbances, physical challenges, learning disabilities, hearing impairments, and speech and language delays for Rensselaer-Columbia-Greene BOCES.

I was fortunate to be one of the first educators to conduct a class at an elementary school, within the local community, for children with severe and profound disabilities, long before inclusive education was even something thought of.

A few years later I served as an education program assistant for the State Education Department, training teachers on laws and regulations relative to special education. Later, I became an adjunct faculty member at Russell Sage College in Troy, where I taught for 13 years.

When I became a parent, I decided to open my own private pre-school so that I could be a parent and teacher simultaneously. I operated my private school for 10 years and I also began my own consulting business to support parents and those who work with children.

In 1990, I became a full-time professor at Hudson Valley Community College, where I taught pre-service educators for 24 years. I served as the department chairperson for 12 of those years.

One thing I would say to new teachers is: ‘Look at their faces.’ Students’ faces show us if they are engaged and listening or if they are confused or experiencing trouble at school or at home.”

Nancy T. Cupolo retired from Hudson Valley Community College in 2014 but still runs her consulting business.
Louis D'Aquila

“Why did I become a teacher? As many teachers would agree, it was perhaps most or even just one special teacher whom we had in our school or college days who made all the difference in our world - not just at that time but forever.

To the best of my recollection, I was a poor reader in grade school, not quick enough in math to solve complex word problems and rather a mischievous young boy who received plenty of (negative) attention. Dyslexia was not a very common diagnosis at that time. Such students were just considered ‘slow or bad readers.’ I am sure that I was and still am dyslexic, but I taught myself to live with it.

It was at Brooklyn Prep Jesuit High School that I began to turn my life around. Many of my friends were going to attend this all-boys school, and I wanted to join them. However, not only were my basic academic skills lacking but also my mom, who was a widow, could not really afford the tuition. Mom appealed to the headmaster, who agreed to take me if I passed remedial classes over the summer.

Well, not only did I make it in, but I also played football and ran track and was on the honor roll all four years. With the support of my teachers at Prep, I excelled in Latin and German, and I began to think about becoming a teacher and coach.

I graduated in 1976 from Wagner College and got my first job teaching German in a Lutheran school on Staten Island. After that school year, I took about a 10-year break from teaching to serve as a medic for the U.S. Army in Germany, then became a regional sales and marketing director for E.R. Squibb & Sons covering hospitals in Europe, and even tried medical school for a year in Germany.

I decided to return to the U.S. in 1986 and resume my teaching career. Classroom teaching came back to me very quickly. I already had certification in German 7-12, and then also added Spanish, elementary education and school administration to my resume. Ultimately, I completed a doctorate at SUNY Stony Brook for foreign language education and computer assisted language learning.

Over the course of my teaching career, I ran several student exchanges to Europe (including to the Berlin Wall as it was being dismantled) and countless field trips to Lincoln Center, the Metropolitan Opera, the Museum of Modern Art, the Cloisters and an annual German language competition.

After retiring from teaching, I published a book, Daddy, It’s Only a Game, in 2013, regarding my concerns about school sports, sportsmanship and fair play, and all the abuses I had witnessed as a coach.

It has been a great career journey. I wouldn’t have changed a thing.”

Louis D'Aquila retired in 2012 from Lindenhurst Public Schools where he taught German, Spanish and English as a Second Language for 24 years.

Russell Lewis McCaw Jr.

“I became a teacher after being inspired by my mom, an elementary reading specialist, and by several teachers I had in high school and college. My 33 years in education included 29 years teaching at the secondary level, mostly at Ithaca High School. While at Ithaca High, my automotive technology students frequently won state championships and twice won national recognition in Plymouth AAA Troubleshooting contests. I also served as president of the Bradford Teachers Association.

During a brief break in my New York state service, I taught for two years at Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte, N.C., and was named director of curriculum improvement for automotive technology programs at 56 colleges in North Carolina as part of a two-year grant program. I then returned to New York and taught at Wayne Finger Lakes BOCES for five years. I later was named business and community liaison for BOCES for two years until my retirement in 1993. In 2016, at age 80, I became a published author with my book, Now I Get It! Every Driver’s Handbook, which explains how cars work in simple language.”

Russell Lewis McCaw Jr. spent most of his career in Ithaca before retiring from Wayne Finger Lakes BOCES in 1993.
Lois Tannenbaum

“I began teaching in the Bronx in 1984 where I lived, grew up and was raising my son alone as a single mother.

I had been working as a secretary and started college at night in 1980 to earn a BA in business. However, my son was diagnosed with a learning disability. I did not feel that he was receiving all that he should educationally, but I wasn’t sure exactly what he needed.

I decided to switch my major and graduated summa cum laude with an M.S. and a dual major in education and psychology with a concentration in learning disabilities. I left the business world at a $5,000 per year cut in salary to become a teacher and never looked back.

I taught both general education classes and self-contained. Initially, I preferred the self-contained classes because I found that, in every general education class, there was a percentage of children who could have been better served in a smaller class with greater attention.

Many years later in my career, I trained and became a district-wide inclusion education facilitator and found that, with the right training and supports, children with mild to moderate disabilities could succeed in the general education class setting.

I am retired, but my love of children and teaching lives on within me forever.”

Lois Tannenbaum retired in 2010 after a teaching career in the Bronx and the Newburgh City School District.

Michele Munski

“After graduating from SUNY Oswego in 1972, I was able to put my N-6 teaching certification to use by teaching grade six in the West Seneca schools. I was assigned to the oldest school in the district. I remember putting apple cider on the windowsill of my early 20th century schoolroom where the cider stayed cold! The wood parquet floors in my classroom were beautiful, but I had to put a wedge under my overhead projector cart to stop it from rolling with the slope in the floor.

After moving to the Rochester area, I tried substitute teaching, which created many amusing memories.

One day while subbing in kindergarten, there was an abundance of glue on tables after the morning kindergarteners left. Cleanup was a lengthy and tedious process. I finished scrubbing tabletops only to look up and see the p.m. class coming into the classroom. No lunch that day!

June was a busy month for subs. Once I went to sub in a rural district as a PE teacher. Turns out it was the day parents could have a picnic lunch with their students. The path to the outdoor picnic was through the gym. Both PE teachers took that day off.

A brand new education graduate and I were left subbing for the PE teachers. Lesson plan for the entire day? Kickball. My partner and I followed the plan until the temperature rose to high 80s. We moved the game indoors to the gym due to the heat. Next, the cement gym floor began to sweat, causing slipping, so we could no longer continue with kickball. We rummaged through the equipment closet and did obstacle courses/dodgeball/golf or anything we could imagine to round out the day. We were two tired subs at day’s end.

Substitute teaching is a daily adventure.”

Michele Munski retired in 2012 from Rush-Henrietta Central Schools.
Sylvia Kirk

“My first position was in PS 20 on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. In January 1966, I visited the class that I would take over in February from a first-year teacher who had become pregnant. (Back then, expectant mothers had to leave when they began to ‘show’.) The class was so well-run! The children were so well-behaved! This was going to be fun!

When I entered the class for real, it became obvious that my predecessor had possessed many of the skills I had yet to learn. My life turned into a nightmare of frustration and incompetence. By the end of the year, I felt I had ruined those poor children. But somehow, by the following year, I had picked up a few important lessons, and I began my career as a teacher for real.

After three years, I moved to Long Island and began the rest of my career as a kindergarten teacher in the Comsewogue school district in Port Jefferson Station.

The class sizes were in the high twenties those years. I began inviting parents into class to help with playtime activities. They made my job less stressful – and the adult company was a bonus.

The activity I’m most proud of initiating is a period three times a week when I had third and fourth grade volunteers come to class to supervise small group learning with activities such as jigsaw puzzles, board games, reading, story writing, hands-on science, hands-on math, and computer learning games. The older kids, not necessarily the best students, gained as much as the kindergarteners did from the experience.

I’ve often joked to other teachers that, in New York, no matter how much you think you love your job, you won’t discover how really great it is until you retire! I’m constantly aware of how fortunate I am to have a livable pension that is secure.

At my first job, I had been contributing to the New York City Teachers’ Retirement System. When I moved to Comsewogue, I didn’t know I had to take my three years’ worth of contributions out of NYC and transfer my initial membership date to NYSTRS.

Luckily, I attended a meeting where a NYSTRS rep told us about the process for transferring contributions and service credit from another public retirement system into NYSTRS. Within about two weeks I was able to arrange for the transfer of my NYC pension money to NYSTRS and preserve my earlier service credit.

Thank goodness!”

Carol Carney retired in 1998 from Brookhaven-Comsewogue Union Free Schools after a more than 30-year career as a kindergarten teacher.

Carol Carney

“I began teaching in 1964 in a fourth grade class at Spruce School in the North Tonawanda City School District, where I had been educated K-12. My starting salary was $5,009. I had always wanted to be a teacher and I’m glad I persevered.

In June 1972, I resigned to raise our family of three children. I then worked as a substitute teacher until 1984, when I was hired full time again. I was 42 years old! I was able to fit in requirements for a master’s degree as well.

Each September, I did a Monarch butterfly unit where we raised and released Monarchs that lived in our area. My hobby is quilt-making so I decided to make quilts with the children. At first, we used coloring book prints and fabric crayons. Later, the art teacher worked with the children on original drawings to use as patterns. We gave many quilts to the local children’s hospital and Project Linus. One with a patriotic design hung in the North Tonawanda School Board room for a few years.

I was also the elementary science coordinator for eight years and I had to go to five schools to administer the state science skills test. I called it the traveling road show!

One special school initiative I remember was a Western New York Institute of the Arts program where local artists, actors and musicians came into our classrooms to teach different units – such a treat for us all!

I joined the Retirement System in 1964 as a Tier 1 member. In 1972, when I first resigned, I thought about taking the accumulated money to buy a then expensive microwave oven. I’m glad I gave that idea up and kept my membership!

My husband of 57 years and I are enjoying our comfortable retirement. So far it has been a ‘Wonderful Life!’”

Carol Carney retired in 2004 from the North Tonawanda City School District after 30 years teaching.
Paula Camardella Twomey

“I had always wanted to be a teacher since the second grade. I had great role models to follow. Several of my elementary school teachers were my idols.

I graduated from SUNY Albany in 1970, went to Middlebury College (Madrid Campus) for my M.A., and started teaching in 1971 in Cohoes, where I began their Spanish program. At that time, Spanish was just becoming popular in upstate New York. I also started Spanish programs in Watkins Glen and Arlington, MA, before spending the bulk of my career in the Ithaca City School District, teaching every level of Spanish from seventh grade through high school, from 1983 to 2006.

I introduced project-based learning to all my classes. I offered ‘La Mesa Española’ each Friday in the cafeteria to students who wanted to brown-bag it with the teacher. I also used ‘The Gold Star Club’ in which each class had a poster with gold stars for A-quality work. Their gold star strips were cut at the end of the semester and given out as prizes. All students received gold stars! I also had ‘Dining with Twomey,’ in which students spent their lunch period with me to reflect on their behavior in class. I have a folder of compositions from students apologizing for or disclaiming their infractions. Hilarious!

Most fun of all were skits we performed at all levels for every situation and new vocabulary. When our school bought video cameras, we recorded ourselves. With my Spanish 5 students, I received a grant to initiate a puppet theater to bring Spanish to the pre-school program each week. Spanish 4 students tutored at the elementary school nearby. I also began a weekly summer camp for seven- to 10-year-olds and hired my high school students as helpers. We made piñatas, cooked, played Bingo, wrote books, and sang songs all day.

I retired from Ithaca High in 2006 and then un-retired, to teach at Ithaca College for 12 more years. I retired in 2021, after teaching my last three semesters virtually on Zoom.

What I learned over the past 50 years in education (YIKES!) is that students teach us so much about ourselves. It’s never really about the subject matter at all; it’s about seeing our students – from elementary to college-age – finding a way, with our creativity and guidance, to shape their own lives.”

Paula Camardella Twomey retired from Ithaca High School in 2006 and then taught at Ithaca College for 12 more years.

Diane Betzwieser

“I started teaching in 1971 in a rural upstate New York school in Hoosic Valley. After a year of teaching math, earth science and life science, I was assigned five classes of seventh grade life science as well as playground duty during recess, lunch duty and bus duty. I had a bachelors and masters out of Oneonta State. I was 20 years old at the time and was thrilled to have a job.

I looked for a New York State life science curriculum for seventh grade, but there was none at the time. So I asked the tenth grade biology teacher what he wanted the students to be able to do when they got to him. He said make sure they can do proper lab procedures, use a microscope, dissect organs, be able to measure in metrics, and follow all the safety procedures. He loaned me some microscopes and slides.

I had the best time for the next six years. We gathered all kinds of materials from outside and made terrariums where we changed the variables. We also did mold cultures. Many years later, a former student recognized me in the grocery store and told me that he never forgot the mold cultures and that if you have damp feet you can get fungus to grow.

We put everything under the microscope from pond scum to hay infusions and tried to identify all the microorganisms that abounded. We dissected livers, hearts and other things that either the farmer students brought in after their parents had taken farm animals to market or I bought from the grocery store. We raised all kinds of plants, mainly vegetables, and the students took them home to grow. One year we raised chickens in incubators and gave them to the farmers afterwards. We had a variety of store-bought mice and other animals in cages around the room.

Once my two sons were born, I moved to a closer school with more students and a set curriculum. But I will always remember my early teaching days.”

Diane (Decker) Betzwieser retired in 2010 from Shenendehowa Central Schools after a career as a science teacher.
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<tr>
<th>Member Comments About the System and Their Pension</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“My pension has allowed me to pursue many creative interests I would never have been able to do without it. I live in Eugene, Oregon, where I garden and build things. I volunteer at a local native plant nursery. I study Italian and have traveled extensively. I am very grateful I have these opportunities to learn and grow.”</td>
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<td>- <strong>Mary Humphrey</strong> retired in 2009 from the West Genesee school district.</td>
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<td>“My NYSTRS pension keeps me updated about my benefits and other pertinent information. My experience with NYSTRS has been excellent because I received newsletters informing me about board meetings and retiree highlights. The newsletters continue to include important information such as telephone numbers, direct deposit banking information, and tax withholding information.”</td>
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<td>- <strong>Emma Spruill-Howard</strong> retired in 1991 after teaching 28 years in Brentwood schools.</td>
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<td>“If it wasn’t for NYSTRS most of the elderly wouldn’t have money to live on. I am eternally grateful for what it has provided me.”</td>
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<td>- <strong>Marilyn Diamond</strong> retired from Brentwood schools in 1985.</td>
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<td>“We are proud (and thankful) to be members of NYSTRS.”</td>
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<td>- <strong>Lou Cuglietto</strong> retired in 2015 after working in Mount Vernon, Mount Pleasant, and Port Chester-Rye public schools. His wife, Elaine, rose from secretary to assistant superintendent in Rye.</td>
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<td>“NYSTRS has always been helpful to me from pre-retirement seminars to pension statements, their publications, and numerous resources for questions I may have.”</td>
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<td>- <strong>Karen Salzano</strong> retired in 2013 after teaching in Brooklyn and Plainedge, Long Island.</td>
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<td>“The NYSTRS pension has meant a lot in retirement to help meet financial needs. During my years in New York, NYSTRS was supportive and provided what we needed.”</td>
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<td>- <strong>Debby Loucks</strong> retired after more than 40 years as a special education teacher in Red Hook.</td>
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<td>“When I first got into teaching, I never thought about retirement and the pension I would get. As I went through the years of teaching, planning for retirement and receiving a pension became more and more important. I have been retired for more than 10 years now and my NYS Teachers’ Retirement benefit is a very important aspect for me to enjoy my retirement.”</td>
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<td>- <strong>Gary Wilcox</strong> retired in 2008 after teaching 31 years in the Homer Central School District.</td>
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<td>“NYSTRS has been my life-saver. NYSTRS has enabled me to maintain a secure and rewarding future for myself and my family. I can enjoy travel (pre-COVID) and lavish attention on my granddaughter.”</td>
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<td>- <strong>Kermit Ackley</strong> retired in 2008 after teaching 40 years in the Gloversville school district.</td>
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<td>“I’m so pleased to have the opportunity to thank NYSTRS for the wonderful job you do. While so many pension systems are in financial trouble, ours has escaped that fate, I surmise, due to the honesty and competence of you who run it.”</td>
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<td>- <strong>Sylvia Kirk</strong> retired in 1998 from Brookhaven-Comsewogue Union Free Schools after a more than 30-year career as a kindergarten teacher.</td>
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<td>“My pension from NYSTRS has enabled me to continue my passion for teaching. However, I now teach painting to children and adults, thereby combining my passions for teaching and for painting.”</td>
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<td>- <strong>Ann Katsaras</strong> was a special education teacher and curriculum teacher for 25 years at the Eastern Suffolk BOCES.</td>
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<td>“My retirement from NYS has been so comforting as I have such faith in it – even in the pandemic. How lucky we are to have our money in such a dependable place. Thank you!”</td>
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<td>- <strong>Janice Ogden</strong> is a retired teacher from the Prattsburgh Central School District in Steuben County.</td>
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