

The Boulder 21st CCLC program is considered an exemplary after-school program, according to Sandi Smith, who oversees the programs for the Montana Office of Public Instruction.

This past year, more than 97 percent of Boulder students participated in some aspect of the program.

"She doesn't let any grass grow under her feet," said Smith. "She is incredible with ideas for students. She's just a very creative mind. She's always looking for activities for kids, and the beauty of it is she ties in the community. She brings the program right to them.

"She looks at the poverty in Jefferson County and her heart is just open to those kids."

When Volunteer Donna Bailey goes searching for Earnhardt, she often can't find her because Earnhardt's the same size as the kids.

"I don't know where she gets all her energy," said Bailey. "She's like a 3-year-old.

"She knows how to get their respect. It's just there."

Smith said she hears about the program from others in the area — the children's work with the local genealogy library and heritage center, their organizing of historic tours of Jefferson County, as well as the Fairy Festival at Tizer Gardens.

"People are in awe of what those kids do," Smith said.

So it's not surprising that Earnhardt attracted national attention.

The Outstanding Career Practitioner award is "pretty prestigious," said Deborah Crapes, chairwoman of the awards committee for the NCDA. "They're nominated by their peers."

Rebecca Dedmond, a professor at George Washington University nominated Earnhardt after visiting Boulder this spring to teach a career-planning workshop for educators and parents.

She said she was struck by Earnhardt's "giving spirit, her true and deep caring for young people and her community and her vision that all children should have an opportunity to be successful."

Dedmond accompanied Earnhardt on some errands in Boulder and said she was amazed at what she saw.

"Everywhere she (Earnhardt) went she had such a cadre of passionate and sincere friends willing to give back to the community and the children and her teachers. There was a sense of the community gathering around this collective vision that the children will have a better future. It struck me how the community just rallied around her."

"I don't know that I've ever worked in a community that so gathered around to help with a program for its young people," she said. "I did think that was an amazing community."

Reporter Marga Lincoln: 446-4074 or marga.lincoln@helenair.com

Not Yet Rated