

Leading with Heart, Clarity and Curiosity: Denise Buck Retires from PEI

by Heidi Smith



Denise's can-do spirit has infused her work with an ever-expanding team at PEI.

Julie Tennis approached her first meeting with Denise Buck with trepidation. It was 2015 and Buck had just been hired as PEI's new Operations and Program Director. As one of a handful of PEI staff, Tennis would be working closely with her to develop programming in the coastal region. Driving to their appointed meeting spot in Jefferson County, Tennis was plagued by mental 'what ifs.' "I have had very few great bosses," she explains, "and so I was really nervous."

It quickly became apparent to Tennis that her concerns were unnecessary. "In that first meeting, Denise was so engaged," Tennis recalls. "She was leaning into the conversation with all the speakers and asking questions from a place of genuine curiosity. There was this sense of kindness. I had such a feeling of relief that this person was going to be wonderful, and she was."

At the end of July, Buck will retire from PEI. In her eight years as Program Director, the staff she managed expanded from one Regional Coordinator to nine, plus a Multilingual Program Coordinator, a Project Specialist, and an Associate Director of Program, for a total of 12 grateful PEI employees. She has simultaneously served as the Washington State Project Learning Tree Coordinator and received the Gold Star award from PLT at the annual conference this year in recognition of her impact.

She will be missed, not only by her colleagues at PEI but by educators and community partners throughout the state.

Dr. Pam Farr was Executive Director of Teaching and Learning at the Shelton School District until her retirement in 2019. She credits Buck with helping to transform education in the district by working with faculty to design high-impact field experiences with community partners for all students in grades K-9.

“It was a massive project,” says Dr. Farr. “It took us about five years to get to a place where it felt like we were on top of everything. Denise was totally organized and committed to making sure that we got what we needed. She’s one of those unsung heroes who makes sure that everything is working and everyone is happy. It was always behind the scenes, but she was the person that was making it all happen.”

One example was a PEI workshop Farr attended in Leavenworth for statewide school district leaders. “It was thoughtfully put together,” she says. “It was snowy and gray but the outdoor component was varied and there was plenty of time for people to interact and work on things. It was a great conference, and Denise was one of the main minds behind it.”



PEI staff appreciate Denise’s support and positive guidance.

As a leader, Buck combines huge competence and intelligence with warmth and support. “I loved participating in any session where Denise was either training teachers or mentoring staff to train,” says PEI board member Lisa Perry, Community Relations Director at Sierra Pacific Industries. “She really listens to those that she’s working with and creates a safe space to learn.”

Tennis agrees. “Denise always felt like a kind friend who was there to help you be the best you could be at whatever you were doing,” she says. “I appreciated that because my job was always changing as PEI expanded. She was a great listener, had good feedback, and would say, ‘We’re all learning together.’ One thing I learned from her was to ‘follow the yesses.’ Focus on what’s working and don’t get wrapped up in what isn’t.”

That outlook is part of why she's able to accomplish so much, according to Perry. "Denise is one of those rare people who bridge the gap between educators and the public, including business," she notes.

"Facilitating this communication, along with her always positive attitude, really helps get things done. She's always looking for a way to make things work and I have loved having her in planning meetings because she's a 'doer.'"

Buck's last day is July 31st and the PEI team has been gradually shifting her responsibilities to the Executive Director, two new Associate Directors and other regional staff who will be taking on her PLT, Project WILD, and Project WET roles. "She's leaving big shoes to fill," says Farr. "It's hard to find a person with her background and experience along with her commitment and understanding of environmental issues. She's a unique person and she'll be hugely missed."



Denise will have more time to spend with family post-retirement.