



P.E. teacher Logan Stegner and life skills teacher Jennifer Kruse co-created a Wednesday library program to help Port Townsend High School students deal with pandemic-related challenges. For their efforts, they received the Howard Learned Award for Community Education Engagement. (Diane Urbani de la Paz/Peninsula Daily News)

## Pair of Port Townsend teachers honored for their dedication

Duo work to connect with students during difficult circumstances

By Diane Urbani de la Paz

Tuesday, May 25, 2021 1:30am | [NEWS](#) [JEFFERSON COUNTY](#)

**PORT TOWNSEND** — The most important query to students in school this year wasn't about math, English or essay writing.

It was simply: "How's it going for you today?"

That was the question teachers Logan Stegner and Jennifer Kruse unfailingly asked the teenagers at Port Townsend High School — and they kept their hearts open for the answers, whatever they might be.

For their dedication, the pair of educators received the first Howard Learned Awards. The honors were presented last week by Martha Trolin, cofounder of Skillmation, the mentorship and tutoring program that serves Jefferson County and Sequim youngsters.

Stegner, in his second year at Port Townsend High, and Kruse, in her 12th, invented a weekly morning program for students who, amid the pandemic, were struggling with various subjects.

They invited Skillmation subject coaches — volunteers with expert knowledge in history, math, literature, writing, Spanish, chemistry and other areas — to work one-on-one with kids. The program began Wednesday mornings in the school library, then went to online meetings; now it's back in the library.

While tackling their own learning curves as online teachers, Kruse and Stegner have facilitated this haven for more than 56 students and 12 subject coaches. Besides the academic work, the two spent time just talking with kids.

What his students need, Stegner said, is “connection, honestly, with another human being. They’ve felt incredibly isolated” over the past many months.

“Our school really serves as a community, a place to engage,” he said, “with some sort of caring person outside their home.”

The new awards celebrate that connection, Trolin said. They’re named for Howard Learned, a Skillmation mentor who’s guided students from elementary school on up to high school, as a volunteer.

Learned’s deep roots in the region and his embrace of new people and ideas exemplify the spirit of this award, Trolin noted.

Learned himself handed Stegner and Kruse their rewards: envelopes containing gift cards for Finistere restaurant in Uptown Port Townsend.

In a ceremony before last Thursday’s Port Townsend School Board meeting at Blue Heron Middle School, in-person and online attendees watched and applauded the duo — twice.

Stegner, a graduate of Portland State University, teaches P.E. and weight training; he's known as Coach Stegner.

Kruse, an alumna of the University of Montana at Missoula, has a course load ranging from culinary arts and health to career and life skills.

This year has been tough, she said, because the community's struggles strongly affect young people.

"There is a lot of need ... our housing crisis, mental health, homelessness, drug use, we have it all," she said.

"It trickles down to our kids ... social-emotional health has been a huge issue. It's going to be an uphill battle to get back to where we were academically."

In the face of it all, Kruse, 44, seeks to maintain a positive attitude and show young people that it's possible to keep making progress. The Skillmation volunteers and colleagues such as Stegner make a big difference; Stegner, at 26, has "added a real breath of fresh air," she added.

"It's been a crazy year," Stegner acknowledged, yet through it all, he's able to connect with his students.

That, for him, is what matters most.

In just a few weeks, the 2020-21 academic year will be complete — and then Kruse and Stegner may well teach summer school. While Kruse said she might work on a summer program involving food, Stegner is in line to teach elementary-age kids.

"I'm up for it," he said.

To learn more about Skillmation and its programs in Jefferson County and in the Sequim School District, see [Skillmation.org](https://www.skillmation.org) or email [info@skillmation.org](mailto:info@skillmation.org).

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Howard Learned, a longtime mentor to Port Townsend students, is the namesake for an award presented to educators who show extra care for their students. (Diane Urbani de la Paz/Peninsula Daily News)

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**Daily News**

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