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—Contributor..... Virginia Ray
—Contributor email.....ginnypray@gmail.com
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Notes from editor (not for publication):

Your reporting makes her come alive. Thanks, G.

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 'They're just naturally curious and in awe of everything
2 around them'

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3 Jen Ricker of Winston Prouty is the first teacher of infants
4 to be named Vermont Early Childhood Educator of the Year

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5 TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

6 When Jen Ricker heard the news that she had been
7 named the 2025 Vermont Early Childhood Educator of the Year by
8 the Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children
9 (VTAEYC; vtaeyc.org), she "burst into tears."
10 "It's a great job," says Ricker, the lead teacher at the
11 [Winston Prouty Center for Child and Family Development](#).

12 Ricker teaches infants and toddlers and was recognized
13 for her two decades of work supporting children and families,
14 building warm and welcoming relationships between family and
15 classroom and establishing parents and teachers as partners in
16 each child's development.

17 She was also recognized for supporting fellow educators
18 through mentorship and community leadership.

19 Ricker received the award on Oct. 24 at the VTAEYC
20 Annual Conference in Burlington's Hotel Champlain, where
21 hundreds of early childhood educators gathered.

22 "Jen Ricker knows the family values and culture of each
23 infant and toddler in her classroom and helps families learn
24 about their child's learning and developmental steps. This is what
25 exemplary care and education looks like for our youngest
26 children," says Sharron Harrington, executive director of VTAEYC.
27 "She creates classrooms where children thrive, families build
28 positive connections to their children's education, and colleagues
29 grow as professionals. Her leadership and mentorship sets a
30 powerful example for the field."

31 Ricker is known for her collaborative approach and
32 ability to tailor learning environments to each child's individual
33 needs.

34 In her classroom at Winston Prouty, infants and toddlers
35 are encouraged to explore, grow, and build self-confidence. She
36 also co-leads Family Circle, a monthly gathering that brings
37 families together for shared meals, conversation, and peer
38 support.

39 "Families are our partners in children's learning," says
40 Ricker. "When we share ideas and observe together, we create
41 the best support system for each child. I love working with the
42 youngest children because there's so much growth that happens
43 in that first year of life."

44 "She is the teacher every parent hopes for: empathetic,
45 tireless, and dedicated to lifting up everyone in the classroom,"

46 says Dora Levinson of Building Bright Futures, who also has a
47 child at Winston Prouty and nominated Ricker.
48 "Jen goes above and beyond to support children,
49 families, and colleagues, and ensures the next generation of
50 educators is empowered and inspired," says Levinson. "Through
51 mentoring high school students and coaching teachers across
52 Vermont, Ricker is helping strengthen the early childhood
53 workforce and recruit talented future educators. Her philosophy
54 centers on curiosity, independence, and collaboration as
55 foundations for lifelong learning."
56 As Vermont Early Childhood Educator of the Year, Ricker
57 will receive a \$2,500 prize and all expenses paid to attend the
58 National Association for the Education of Young Children
59 (NAEYC) Annual Conference in 2026 in Washington, D.C.

60 A warm hug

61 Even in a short interview, it's not hard to see why Ricker
62 was chosen for this award.

63 The first teacher of infants ever to receive the honor,
64 Ricker is warm, calm, and speaks from the heart.

65 "It's really about creating relationships with them and
66 helping them feel safe and respected," Ricker says when asked
67 what does and what can someone actually teach an infant.

68 "Once you have a nice relationship like that with them,
69 they're comfortable to explore, so then you can provide material
70 and experiences for them," she continues. "It's really like the
71 beginning of school: [giving them] all the building blocks they
72 need to learn addition and reading and all that stuff when they
73 get older."

74 Ricker, who has two twentysomething daughters, has
75 been an early childhood teacher for about 20 years and at
76 Winston Prouty since 2022.

77 She earlier worked at [Early Education Services](#), a
78 Brattleboro agency that runs Head Start programs in Windham
79 County.

80 Having started her career with children ages 3 to 5 and
81 then moving to work with toddlers and infants, Ricker found she
82 “really loves” the younger set.

83 She works now in the infant room at Winston Prouty
84 with six babies, ages 4 months to 16 months, along with another
85 full-time teacher and an afternoon part-time teacher.

86 Some of the wee ones can’t yet even roll over, others are
87 just learning to do that, and some are a moment away from that
88 first step on their own.

89 All, it seems, are quite curious about one another.

90 “They come up to each other and study each other’s
91 faces and body parts,” Ricker says, and you can tell she’s seeing
92 the little ones in her mind’s eye and smiling. “They’re just
93 learning how to gently touch somebody rather than yank on their
94 hair. And they’re looking at their faces.”

95 To teach gentleness, not yanking, Ricker says teachers
96 explain to the babies, saying, “Oh, I see she’s smiling; she likes
97 when you touch her gently like that.” Or, “Oh, I see she’s crying;
98 she doesn’t want you to touch her like that.”

99 How do they get that at such a young age?

100 “There’s some hand-over-hand stuff where you hold their
101 hands and have them touch your face gently, so they get the feel
102 for it,” says Ricker, adding, “Wouldn’t it be great if all the adults
103 in the world could be respectful to each other and look at body
104 language and pay attention to it? It’s OK to express your needs,
105 and it’s OK to disagree, but if somebody’s saying they don’t like it,
106 then you need to stop.”

107 For Ricker, the best part of her job is “the excitement of
108 the kids.”

109 “They’re just naturally curious and in awe of everything
110 around them,” she says. “If you pay attention to that and really be
111 with them in that, it’s an amazing experience.”

112 Ricker takes a beat to express what, for her, is the most
113 frustrating aspect of early childhood education.

114 “For me, it’s the country’s kind of unawareness or not
115 understanding how important working with young children is —
116 still,” she says, noting a widely circulated graph that shows
117 human development.

118 That graph shows that 90% of human brain development
119 occurs within the first five years of life and 80% of it is in the first
120 three years.

121 “And we spend the least amount of education the
122 younger they are,” Ricker says. “To me, that’s flipped.”

123 So much work with social and emotional development
124 with preschool children, she observes.

125 “If we put our resources into really nurturing that, we’d
126 be spending less money on prisons and conflicts and things like
127 that,” Ricker says.

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VIDEO:

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LOGLINE (SOCIAL MEDIA):

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