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CMS » News

Deanna Cureton, LEAD Learning Community Teacher of the Year

4/12/2017 *Maintaining high expectations, mutual respect with her students*

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Deanna Cureton's students at Charlotte Engineering Early College (CEEC) have a new name for her: Teacher of the Year. "They've basically replaced my name with that," she said. "It's pretty great."

Cureton is the Teacher of the Year for the Leadership Enrichment Achievement Differentiation Learning Community. "She maintains very high expectations for her students in a supportive classroom environment," said Principal Will Leach. "Also known as 'Momma Cureton,' Deanna truly cares for her students and their success at the next level. There is mutual respect between the teacher and the student."

Cureton teaches English Honors II and serves as the 10th-grade team leader. She joined CEEC last year teaching freshmen and will follow her students all the way to graduation. "It's a great way to see the amazing progress they've made and really develop relationships with students," she said.

To make the announcement, Leach called Cureton to the front office as she was grading papers. She was surprised by fellow faculty members and her family. "My mother, brothers, mother-in-law, husband and daughter were here," she said. "I went from shock to just tears. It was such a surprise."

Being recognized by her peers is particularly special to Cureton. "Sometimes this can be a thankless profession," she said. "I am truly thankful. This validates you are making a difference with the students."

A native of Dayton, Ohio, Cureton earned her bachelor's degree from Winston-Salem State University. She considered studying law, but realized it wasn't the path for her. "It isn't in my personality," she said.

Instead, she earned her master's degree from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical University and began her teaching career at Glenn High in Forsyth County. In 2004, she moved to North Mecklenburg High.

Cureton says that teaching at CEEC has been a learning experience for her. "After 16 years of teaching, it's completely changed the type of teacher that I am," she said. "My lessons are focused on collaboration and project-based learning. It's made me a better teacher. My students have benefited from having a voice and a say and a choice. They're very involved in the learning process."

Cureton also values the unique experience of working in an early college program. "As a first-generation college graduate, access to college courses is so important. We all know people that are struggling to pay off student loans and being able to leave here with up to 60 credit hours is invaluable to our students. This model allows students, regardless of their economic status, to have opportunities to become whatever they want."

Cureton spends her free time with her husband of 12 years and 4-year-old daughter. "She's full of energy and personality," she said. "She knows I won something at work and had cake. She told me she was proud of me."



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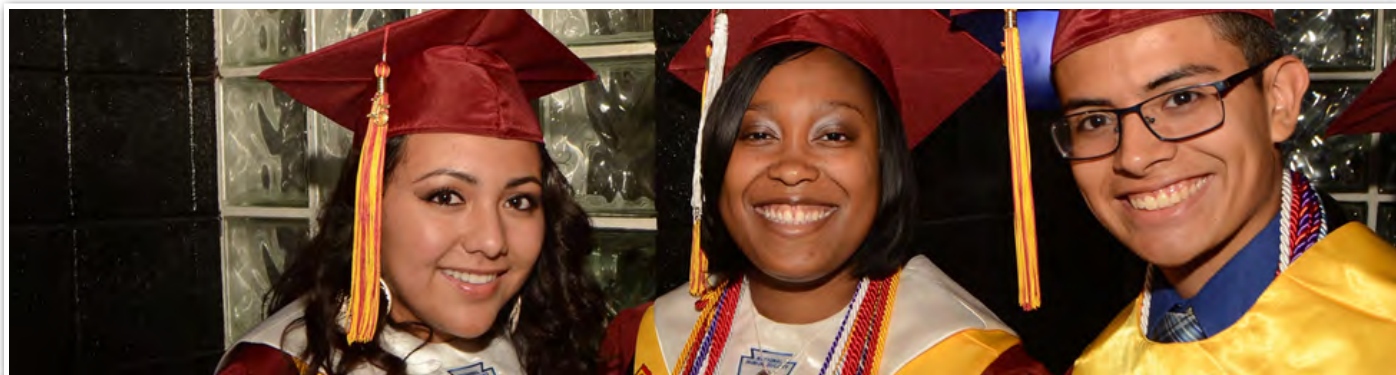
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Mary Kathryn Fashjian, Central Learning Community Teacher of the Year

4/12/2017 *Treasuring students' 'oooh' moments*

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Mary Kathryn Fashjian has two hobbies she incorporates into her classroom: reading and gardening. She started a book club for Dilworth Elementary teachers. "I tell my students you have book clubs, so do your teachers," she said. "I love to read books and talk about them."

Fashjian, a fourth-grade teacher, also has a garden outside the window of her classroom. "It's good stress relief for me," she said. "We were growing kale for our class rabbit but the squirrels got it. I guess we are going to have to start again."

The Charlotte native is the 2017 Central Learning Community Teacher of the Year. "They told me they would announce the winner on Thursday," said Fashjian. "So I was quite surprised when they made the announcement in Wednesday's staff meeting. It was amazing because I

had no idea."

Knowing that she was chosen by her peers for this honor makes Fashjian "feel incredible. I get to work with the most amazing people in this school. I've learned so much from the people I work with. It feels great to know they have my back."

Fashjian is a graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and joined Dilworth immediately after graduation. She is now in her fifth year at the school. "I love Dilworth because it is truly a neighborhood school," said Fashjian. "Most of our students walk to school. I didn't have that experience growing up. They are already in a community spirit when they get here."

She grew up wanting to be a journalist, but changed her mind as she got older. "I didn't think I had the right traits to be a journalist," she said. "I decided to use my passion for writing and reading to work with kids." Many of her peers agreed that teaching was a good fit.

Fashjian started volunteering with children and soon learned she loved working with them. "I love their personalities and watching them develop and grow. They're tiny little humans still figuring out who they are and I love being a part of that."

She also loves a challenge. Several years ago, a spirited student was assigned to her class. "They gave me a warning about his energy," she said. "He just really could not sit still. He bounced around the room all the time. Well, I can relate to that. I have a hard time sitting still too. So I would bounce around with him. And while we were bouncing, we would talk about things he was learning."

That student is now in seventh-grade and his mother occasionally checks in with Fashjian. "She says he's doing great in school and thanks me for helping him. He's a student I will never forget."

Fashjian also cherishes the moments when her students truly grasp something new. "When I look out and see confusion, I keep going and going and then we have what I call the 'oooh' moment. Little lightbulbs are going on all over the place as they figure it out. Whether it takes 30 minutes or two days, when they get it, I know that's why I am here."



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Dana Frank, South Learning Community Teacher of the Year

4/12/2017 *Making scientists out of all students*

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Dana Frank leads the Science Olympiad at Community House Middle and was asked by Principal Jamie Brooks to talk about it on the school's morning announcements. "We're headed to state, so I thought I would get on there, talk about those students and be done," said Frank.

Brooks had other plans, however. As Frank was talking, she noticed balloons out of the corner of her eye and realized she'd been named Teacher of the Year for the South Learning Community. "Being honored by my peers is quite humbling," she said. "The thing I love about working with the other teachers here is that we ask each other for help and encourage one another to do better. I hope this honor means that I am open and helpful to

my team."

Frank joined CMS seven years ago as an eighth-grade science teacher. She previously taught in Houston and Augusta, Ga. When her husband's job at Electrolux moved to Charlotte, she followed and took the position at Community House.

A native of Chicago, Frank grew up with a strong love of science. Her grandparents had a cabin in West Yellowstone. She spent her childhood collecting rocks and bugs, fishing and learning about wildlife. While many members of her family were teachers, she didn't consider teaching an option. "I didn't find education, education found me," she said.

In Houston, she started substitute teaching and realized she loved, especially middle school. During a long-term assignment, her department chair approached her about earning her teaching certification and she eagerly pursued it. "It was something I never considered doing," said Frank. "It's never where I thought I would be. But it's where I should be."

Brooks said Frank is an irreplaceable teacher. "She doesn't have time or energy for the negativity that grabs hold of some, as she is too focused on the success of her students," she said. "She is constantly working on and tweaking rigorous, engaging lessons that align to standards and enhance literacy."

Frank said working with students who have challenges or don't consider themselves to be good at science is one of the best parts of her job. "My motto is, 'Everyone is a scientist,'" she said. "When a student comes in and says, 'I hate science,' I say, 'Great, we're going to change that.'"

At her school in Augusta, she worked with an autistic student who was moved from a special-needs class to her room. "We had to tape off a special area for his desk," said Frank. "As long as he had his special area he was fine. By the end of the year, he would say, 'I am great at science! I am so great at science!'"

Her classes focuses on hands-on activities and include real world scenarios. "They have to see a connection between what they learn in the classroom and the world they live in. My eighth-graders could have predicted the water crisis in Flint, Michigan," said Frank. "The city wasn't properly testing the water. Our students spend several weeks evaluating the water in our creek and our tap water."



Frank passed along her love of science to her daughter, Heidi, who works in advertising in New York City. "We are always emailing each other back and forth with links to science stories and news that we see every day," she said. "She is a continual learner and my husband and I are very proud of that."

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Krystil Irvin: East Learning Community Teacher of the Year

4/12/2017 *Passing on a love of literature*

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Visitors to Krystil Irvin's classroom immediately notice overstuffed bookshelves are tucked into every available space. "I love literature," she said. "I would be content to spend all my days on a couch with a blanket and a book. My parents said I've always felt passionately about reading. Before I even knew how, I would try to read the words on the page."

Today, Irvin tries to ignite that passion in her eighth-grade language arts students at Crestdale Middle. "I love being able to pass a love of literature on to them," she said.

Irvin was born in Freeport, N.Y., and moved to Weddington when she was seven. She graduated from Union County Public Schools. Teaching wasn't always her dream. "When I was little, I did make my stuffed animals be my students so I could practice teaching," she

said. "I knew I wanted to work with kids but I thought maybe I'd be a therapist."

She started as a psychology major at Furman University. Her sophomore year, her course work became very research-focused. "That just wasn't right for my personality," she said. She switched her major to English.

After graduation, she attended a CMS job fair. Crestdale was the first school she was interested in and she's been there ever since. "I enjoy everything about teaching middle school," she said. "These kids are quirky, funny, dramatic and unpredictable. They're becoming the people they are going to be and I love being a part of that."

Principal Jennifer Schroeder recently organized a school-wide assembly to talk to students about her expectations for the fourth quarter. Irvin attended and wondered why the band was playing. Then her family walked in. "It suddenly occurred to me what was happening," she said.

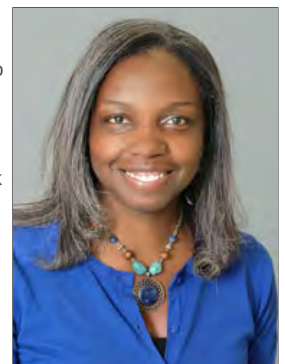
Schroeder announced that Irvin is the Teacher of the Year for the East Learning Community. "My students got to speak and I basically cried the whole time," Irvin said. "It's such an honor to invest in these kids. I hope that's what my co-workers see in me."

Irvin is a resident of Matthews and said Crestdale is home. "The staff here is my family. We share, plan and work together. My best friends are here."

She learned about the importance of student relationships during her first year of teaching. "I had a student that, to say he was struggling would be a huge understatement," she said. "I worked so hard to help him understand that he had an adult that cared about him. There was an adult invested in him. We keep in touch today and I know I made a difference."

That's a goal that Irvin has carried ever since. "I want every student to know that they have someone that cares about them and is invested in their success."

Irvin got married more than two years ago and many of the pews were filled with former students. "A lot of people keep asking me when I am having kids," she said. "I tell them I already have 100."



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Dahleesia Oates Johnson, Beacon Learning Community Teacher of the Year

4/12/2017 Deeply rooted in CMS, education

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While this is Dahleesia Oates Johnson's second year of teaching in CMS, she's no newcomer to the district. The second-grade Sterling Elementary teacher is a Charlotte native who attended Elizabeth Traditional, Hawthorne Middle and graduated from Olympic High School, where she was voted "most inspirational" in her senior year.

Her roots in CMS run deep. Both of her parents worked for the district: Her mother was a human resources administrator and her father was a courier. The family connection doesn't end there: Her two siblings worked in the After School Enrichment Program and both of her grandparents retired from CMS.

Johnson was recently named Teacher of the Year for the Beacon Learning Community. "This honor means so much to me because I really feel like I've really come full circle," she said. "I recently posted the news about this honor on Facebook and one of my former classmates said, 'I see you're still being inspirational.' It made me feel great!"

Interim Principal Ann Nivens said Johnson is an outstanding choice to represent the Beacon Learning Community. "Dahleesia is an outstanding teacher who is extremely passionate about her kids and has very high expectations for every one of them," Nivens said. "She is a team player and will do what's best for kids. She provides great instruction, has excellent classroom management and works diligently to ensure that her students are successful."

Johnson was inspired to enter education by many of her CMS teachers, particularly a culinary arts teacher at Olympic High School. "She always tried to help me see that I could go beyond what I thought I could," she said. "I wanted to quit, but she kept pushing me. By the end of the year, I won the Silver Knife Student Award."

Johnson developed her teaching skills working with younger children in her church's Sunday school class when she was in middle school. "I loved to help make the stories come alive for them. We did skits, plays and really learned the material." Despite that, Johnson entered college with the desire to study law. "My mother convinced me that I had a gift for teaching. She said, 'You can become an advocate for another child.'"

Johnson graduated from North Carolina Central University with honors and a bachelor's degree in elementary education. She married a classmate who is an attorney. After college, Johnson taught kindergarten through fourth grade in Durham Public Schools until her family relocated to Charlotte two years ago.

Johnson credits relationship-building with helping students succeed in the classroom and earned her English Language Learners (ELL) license to better educate her ELL students. Last year, Johnson had a student who was struggling academically. "She was at a level E and wanted to get to a level M," she said. "That is quite a challenge. We worked and worked. She did it. And today, she's ahead of grade level as a third-grader. If you believe in a student, they will believe in themselves."

This year, a student who needed a new classroom environment was transferred to Johnson's class. "Today, he's very respectful and his work ethic has changed," she said. "The way he sees himself has changed."



He recently invited Johnson to a teacher appreciation event at his martial arts school where he said some nice things about her. "I was late for choir practice at church, but I had to go!" she said. "This was such a special moment."

Johnson is passing her love of education on to her two-year-old daughter, Savannah. "She will not go to bed at night unless we read to her," she said. "Then she tries to read it to us. My mom said her love of reading probably developed during the nine months she was nestled inside, while I was teaching and probably absorbed a lot of my lessons!"

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Maggie Mason, North Learning Community Teacher of the Year

4/12/2017 *Bringing a 'fresh spirit of learning' to students*

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Maggie Mason became interested in child development after having her son, who is now a senior at Hough High School. She immersed herself in studying books about early childhood development. "I was especially fascinated by how children learn to communicate, cognitively and physically develop, and learn how to read," Mason recalled.

As her son got older, she started to think more about the teaching profession and decided to get her master's degree from UNC-Charlotte instead of returning to her former career in business. She became a teacher assistant at Davidson Elementary in 2007. She was hired as a teacher in 2008 when her son was a second-grader at the school.

Today, she is a third-grade teacher and was recently named the North Learning Community Teacher of the Year. At a school-wide assembly, Principal Dana Jarrett announced that Mason was the recipient of the Charlotte Hornets Innovation Grant. "That was wonderful in and of itself," said Mason. "But then I noticed balloons and cameras and I thought, 'Something else is going on.'"

Mason said being named Teacher of the Year for her learning community is a humbling experience, and one that couldn't happen without her colleagues and the administration team at Davidson. "We all work together. I don't do anything by myself. I am honored to be able to work with such dedicated, talented staff. They all inspire me to want to do my best every day."

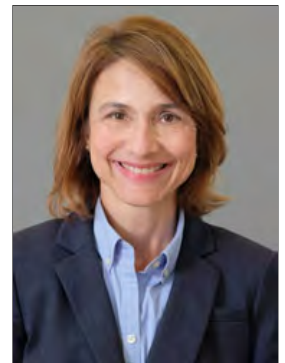
Jarrett said Mason is a shining example of how teachers can make a difference with students. "She brings a fresh spirit of learning to the school community, her colleagues and most importantly, to her students," he said. "Mrs. Mason consistently put students and their needs first with an amazing smile on her face through every situation. Whether you are an administrator, colleague, parent or student, Mrs. Mason is the greatest example of the finest educator possible."

This year, Mason is trying something different by co-teaching with another third-grade teacher. Together, they share 37 students. Mason teaches science and math. "I feel I am able to do a better job at meeting the diverse needs of all my students with a focused content," she said. "We can dive much deeper into the subjects, and I just love teaching math."

Mason says the administration at Davidson Elementary allows her to thrive. "I can come up with new ideas, take them to the principal or assistant principal and they support and encourage me to go with them," she said.

Five years ago, she initiated the Math and Movement program at her school, a nationwide kinesthetic program designed to keep students active and moving during math class. "I want to continue to grow as a teacher and keep improving and be able to positively adapt to the changes and needs in education," she said. "I am always looking for new strategies to use."

It's that enthusiasm that keeps Mason coming back to her classroom. "I love coming to work every day," she said. "I can't remember the last time I didn't want to come to school and collaborate with teachers and students. Every child deserves to have access to an excellent public education. I hope in some small way I can contribute to this as a teacher at Davidson."



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Jeneise Myrick, Project L.I.F.T. Learning Community Teacher of the Year

4/12/2017 Removing barriers to learning

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rd teacher to surprise.
celebration to announce that she was the Project L.I.F.T. Learning
of the Year.

She was told there would be a guest speaker in the cafeteria and to invite her students. Leadership would not, however, tell her who the guest speaker was. "Whenever I asked someone, it felt like they just mumbled something and disappeared," said Myrick.

On the day of the event, she did something she hardly ever does and went to the cafeteria to get a salad. A co-worker quickly rushed her out of the room by insisting she needed her help immediately to finish a project. Earlier that day, she stopped by a colleague's classroom where students were drawing a huge congratulations banner but Myrick didn't notice. "The signs were all around me," she said. "I just missed all of them."

When the event finally began, the West Charlotte High culinary teacher was surprised by her students and colleagues. "It was the most wonderful surprise I've ever had in my whole life, said Myrick. "I love what I do. I love my school. West Charlotte reminds me a lot of my high school and it feels like home."

Principal Dr. Timisha Barnes-Jones said Myrick is not only an excellent classroom teacher, but also cares so much for the school and the students. "She goes out of her way to remove barriers for students and ensure they are set up for success beyond high school," she said. "She is a great representative for CMS, the L.I.F.T. Learning Community and West Charlotte because she consistently models a drive for excellence, a culture of care and a belief that all students can succeed. Isn't that what CMS is all about?"

Myrick, a native of Indianola, Miss., worked in community outreach for sports and entertainment for the National Collegiate Athletic Association, the United States Tennis Association and the National Basketball Association for 10 years. Then she decided to teach. "It was the best decision I've ever made," she said. "I was always torn about whether or not I was making an impact on people's lives. I struggled to enjoy jobs I had in the past. Something was always missing."

CMS hired her 12 years ago and she immediately had to learn a new skill - culinary arts. "I came from a line of professional cooks, but my cooking skills were very limited. It was truly a baptism by fire. It motivated me to learn. I pride myself on being very adaptable to any situation. I began my last four jobs with no industry experience and had to immerse myself into the industry. So I became a student of food service."

Myrick said her mother was very happy when she accepted the job. "She always wanted to teach me to cook and I sort of shunned it," she said. "I had to learn to embrace it and love it. Now, we are constantly sharing recipes. My mom was a tremendous resource for me."

Today, she says her culinary classes are organized chaos. "There's pots clanging, students getting their ingredients into place and excitement to see how dishes turn out," she said. "They also want to eat. That's a real motivator."



Her students have catered CMS' State of Our Schools event, Mayor's Youth Employment Program for former Mayor Pro Temp Michael Barnes and West Charlotte High Schools Black History program with current Mayor Jennifer Roberts in attendance. The program has also catered CMS events like the Martin Luther King Jr. Essay and Art Contest and numerous CTE and JROTC events. The students run a restaurant for teachers, called The Mighty Lion and compete in various culinary competitions. "Our culinary program has played a major role in branding who we are here at West Charlotte. Whenever we step outside of its doors, our mission is to promote our school, the wonderful students and staff that we have here."

The WCHS culinary arts program is housed in its own building and will be completely renovated when school opens next fall. "We can't wait to get in there and start using all that new equipment," said Myrick.

Since her introductory class began in January, 10 of her students have started jobs where they use the skills they've learned in her class. "It gives them a sense of pride to learn something that is relevant to their lives," she said. "When what you teach is relevant for students, then the connection is instant and they want to know more. That's one of the things I love about being a culinary arts teacher. The skills I teach them will be with them for a lifetime. When they learn to be confident in those skills, they're ready to go out and show those skills to the world."

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Amber Pratt, Northeast Learning Community Teacher of the Year

4/12/2017 *Sowing seeds for student growth*

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Early in Amber Pratt's teaching career, she had a very challenging third-grade student. "He hated everything about school," she said. "He didn't really see the importance of an education. He really struggled with his grades and behavior."

Pratt worked closely with the student but wasn't sure by the end of the year if she'd made the impact she wanted to make. The student, a recent graduate of Harding University High, recently wrote to Pratt. "He said that his life has totally changed and that during his high school years he became a student leader and created a student club. "He's excited about graduation and remembers that I invested in him and helped make a difference."

Pratt said the student is a good reminder that an educator's investment in a child can take a long time to grow and develop. "I might not always see the fruits of my labor immediately," she said. "I am sowing seeds so other teachers and the community can continue to water the flowers so they can bloom."

That former student isn't the only one who noticed Pratt's hard work. The fourth-grade Hidden Valley Elementary teacher was recently named Northeast Learning Community Teacher of the Year. Pratt and her students reported to the cafeteria for lunch. Upon arrival Pratt noticed several other staff members in the cafeteria and assumed that there was about to be a lockdown drill. "I was expecting that we'd have to hide in the freezer," said Pratt. "But then everyone shouted, 'Surprise!'"

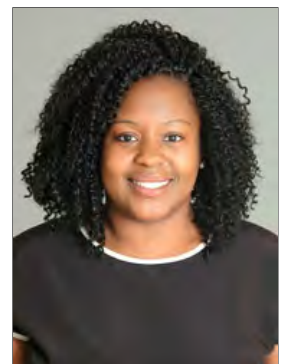
After the announcement, Pratt received huge hugs from her students. "That meant the most to me," she said. "I don't get my validation from pay or awards or certificates. It comes from my students."

Pratt, a native of Hidden Valley, N.C., became interested in teaching in high school and got involved in the Future Teachers of America program. She earned her bachelor's degree from UNC Greensboro and her master's from Queens University.

Pratt also values the peer recognition implicit in winning Teacher of the Year. "To know that my colleagues can see the value of what I do means a lot," she said. "I am over the moon that they see what I'm doing. The irony is I'm doing what I've learned from others. I see what everyone else is doing and I try to find ways to make things work for my classroom. There are so many creative, excellent teachers that I work with. To be chosen to represent them is an honor."

Principal Michael Lungarini said Pratt was an excellent choice to represent Hidden Valley. "Ms. Pratt has a love for teaching," he said. "She has created such a wonderful classroom experience. She leads her students to empower each other to grow socially and academically. She has become a leader among her colleagues and helped propel the staff and student culture."

Pratt is a single mother. Her seven-year-old daughter attends Morehead STEM Academy. "She begs to come to Hidden Valley every day," she said. "But I feel like that's too much pressure on a kid to go to the same school as their parent."



Pratt spends many of her weekends at her daughter's cheerleading competitions. She is also the cheerleading coach at Hidden Valley. "I am not a cheerleader," she said. "But I took what I learned from my daughter's coaches and I brought it here. I am always learning from others."

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Sarah Robinson, West Learning Community Teacher of the Year

4/12/2017 'Dreams can come true'

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Sarah Pinti Robinson's dream came true. Literally.

As a child, she wanted to be her first-grade teacher, Mrs. Robinson. "I hung on to every word she said," she recalled. "I pretended to be her at home."

Becoming a teacher was a predictable choice. But marrying a man named Robinson came as a surprise. Today, she is Mrs. Robinson and a teacher – living her childhood dream. Robinson is a third-grade English as Second Language Teacher (ESL) at Montclair Elementary and was recently named Teacher of the Year for the West Learning Community.

Robinson's principal, Emily Miles, told her that a parent requested a meeting. But when Robinson went to the media center, she was greeted by all 50 of her students as well as her colleagues. "They really surprised me," she said. "I am surrounded by great teachers here who are always pushing each other to be better. We hold our students to high standards. We believe all students can learn."

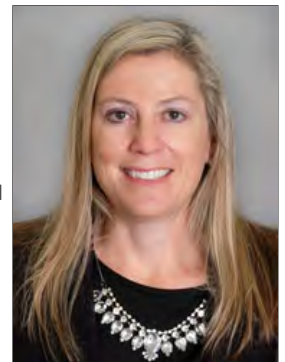
Robinson was born in Pennsylvania and lived in West Virginia and then Charlotte. She is a graduate of Olympic High. She earned her bachelor's degree and master's degree from Queens. She mentors the school's new teachers and also chairs the ELL Committee, which advocates for the school's more than 300 ESL students. This year, she's given six presentations at district and state conferences. In December, she presented at the digital integration conference with two students.

"Sarah embodies all of the great characteristics of an extraordinary teacher," said Miles. "She has a deep sense of purpose in this work and comes to Montclair every day knowing she will have a positive impact on her students because of her unwavering belief that all children can learn. She is a team player who helps to build capacity in her colleagues through coaching, co-teaching and modeling. She is a model for being both a leader and learner."

Robinson joined CMS 14 years ago. She started at Montclair and briefly worked at Winget Park before returning to Montclair. "I really enjoy working with Title 1 students," she said. "I missed them. I love the challenge. The kids are so sweet and eager to learn. I become their biggest advocate and cheerleader. With hard work and determination, their dreams can come true."

Robinson focuses on academic and social-emotional growth with her students. She recently had a student from Honduras who didn't speak any English. "She started in the newcomer group and we worked really hard. She progressed to the novice group, then the intermediate and she is now advanced," said Robinson. "I really pushed her to set new goals. We have chants and cheers we do to encourage each other in class and she told me that she would do them at home when she felt overwhelmed."

Robinson also spends 20 minutes one-on-one with a student with behavioral issues, coaching him on treating his teachers and fellow students better. "He told me that he realizes not many people care about him, but he knows that I do," she said. "That made it all worthwhile. That's where my success is: in my students' success."



Robinson hopes she will inspire her students the way her teacher once inspired her. "I hope that some of my kids will strive to follow their dreams as I did and become a teacher."

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