Teacher of the Year: A Three-Act Play
By Wendy Turner, 2017 Delaware Teacher of the Year

As I reflect on my extraordinary experience as the 2017 Delaware Teacher of the Year, a three act play comes to mind.

Act One

The stage is set; the main character cast. Flashback to Dover Downs on October 25, 2016: I am named the Teacher of the Year in front of 500 distinguished guests. This extraordinary honor left me filled with gratitude, thrilled and excited beyond belief. To be chosen to represent our incredible profession from a group of the most passionate and dynamic teachers from around the state was like no feeling I have ever experienced. As I prepared to take the stage and make the challenging transition from classroom teacher and local leader to spokesperson and role model with a much larger platform, I immediately looked to others around me for guidance and support. My family, The Department of Education and friends and colleagues from the Brandywine School District were supporting characters at my side, guiding me in every way imaginable.

Stage lights brightened and amid a web of nerves and excitement, I began to feel more comfortable in my role as I gave interviews, made media appearances and started to
understand what the coming year would look like. Invisible characters assisted me offstage as past teachers of the year provided counsel and advice on coming speaking engagements and what to expect at national conferences, offering invaluable support. The highlight of act one was seeing myself on the front page of The News Journal with the headline “With Heart and Soul”. The article revealed the very essence of me and my teaching philosophy, to reach beyond academics. I work with my students to develop their social and emotional side as they learn content and skills. This work helps them learn how to embody respect, empathy, citizenship and growth mindset. Act one faded to black as I prepared for the next step of my journey, nervous with anticipation about what it would bring.

Act Two

New settings and supporting characters emerge during act two; the lights brighten once again and I prepare for rising action. I take on critical roles as the year progresses. A new version of Wendy Turner emerges during this time. With practice, I find my voice, begin to tell my story and share my platform as I represent educators in Delaware. This act requires preparation, stamina and careful consideration of the characters I am with and the settings I move into as they are constantly changing! So this is a challenge but a glorious one indeed.

As I continue to teach 2nd grade, I also travel around the state, speaking to various education groups, telling audiences the story how I came to be a teacher. Articulating my platform that is a natural extension of my core beliefs about social emotional learning, I advocate for educating the whole child and supporting trauma informed learning practices for our neediest students. I loved every moment I spent with future educators speaking at Wilmington University and the Delaware Educators Rising spring conference. Reminding the educators of tomorrow that teaching will not be easy, that it will bring them to their knees at times, I tell future teachers they have an extraordinary opportunity to shape tomorrow and that they must teach from the heart. For in order to teach, we must first reach, connecting to students as human beings, sharing hopes, dreams, failures and challenges.

Multiple costume changes and exhausting practices become the norm for me during this time but the role is one I relish as I continue. During this time, I also become a member of the 2017 national teacher of the year cohort at conferences facilitated by the Council of Chief State School Officers. Having the time and opportunity to interact with passionate educators from around the country in all disciplines and practices was powerful fuel for the journey.

The foes in act two are exhaustion and self-doubt as I take on more responsibilities and continue in my learning, constantly in awe of those around me. Part of our work is media training, learning and practicing the fine art of storytelling and articulating goals for our work when we return home. Forever changed after these conferences with these extraordinary people, my interactions with the teachers of the year from around the country helped me continue to develop confidence and climb to new heights. On stage and off, I bask in their
glow and learn from their powerful examples.

The pivotal scene in act two was my address to both the House of Representatives and the Senate in the Delaware Legislature in Dover. I urged lawmakers to support trauma informed learning practices NOW as I shared my passion for educating the whole child. During this time, my classroom evolved even as I spent time away from my students. I return with new ideas about innovation and facilitating learning vs. traditional teaching. It too, will never look the same again after this experience. The challenge becomes clear to me towards the end of act two. How do I relinquish the role and the spotlight, leave the stage and prepare for life without these opportunities and my national cohort as I get ready to return to the classroom, no longer the teacher of the year? My personal and professional boundaries have been pushed farther and wider than ever before thanks to these experiences and the human beings that punctuated them. I am grateful but this question lingers. The lights of act two fade and I prepare for the final act and opportunity to shine this year.

Act Three

Resolution and acceptance, the action comes to a close, preparations are under way to pass the torch. The lights brighten one last time. In the final stretch of the year, attention turns to identifying the next Delaware Teacher of the Year. I attend a conference aptly titled “Next Steps” that helps us determine where and how our voice, energy and experiences will take us in the future. I have grown so much, it’s almost as if my wardrobe no longer fits; the main character has evolved and is forever changed. I begin to accept that my time on stage is coming to a close and I enjoy the final scenes.

I am privileged and honored to address hundreds of teachers at the first day of inservice for the Brandywine School District at the invitation of our superintendent. Having developed confidence, I tackle issues back at my home base, Mt. Pleasant Elementary School. Leading two summer book studies on the topics of Family Engagement and Trauma-Informed Learning Practices was an incredibly rewarding experience. Each engaged boots on the ground in high quality, teacher-led professional development and empowered others to lead for change. Our school is now planning home visits for family engagement and is working to implement trauma-informed learning practices to foster resilient learners and properly support our many students negatively impacted by trauma.

There is no single standout moment in this final act, but rather a melody of beautiful sounds and events. A steady stream of validation starts to flow that slowly but surely confirms that I have evolved into a powerful voice for our students and will remain a fixture on the education landscape in Delaware and beyond. With offers to join the Rodel Teacher Council, the Delaware PTA Advocacy Board and the Delaware State Education Association to work toward legislation to support students impacted by trauma, I have perhaps the best proof yet of my success this year. During this final scene, it becomes clear that when this stage is
empty, when the honor and title are no more, I will simply continue the work because it is now part of who I am, the stage evolving into the wide world beyond this time and place. I will continue to advocate for educating the whole child by embracing social emotional learning and supporting our students unfairly and negatively impacted by trauma. I will continue to develop teacher-led professional development and empower others to lead. I will strive to innovate in the classroom, inspired by my national cohort and the work they do every day. This is possible because of the many I have worked with this year, they have graced me with their presence, guided me with their wisdom and steadied me with their support. One of my most powerful practices continues to be asking for help. I now understand the support I need will never leave me and this allows me to leave the stage gracefully, confident, fulfilled and secure in the promise of the future.

These supporting characters will always be at my side, the fuel for the sequel, friends forever. I smile to myself as I visualize the lights going down for the very last time and the curtain closing on my time as the Delaware Teacher of the Year.


I am forever grateful to the many who have supported me this year; my amazing family: Dan, Maggie and Michael, Betty Torbert and The Department of Education, and my friends and colleagues in the Brandywine School District, particularly my principal, Matthew Auerbach, and our superintendent, Dr. Mark Holodick. I am deeply indebted to the Council of Chief School State Officers and my national teacher of the year family. Without all of them, this version of Wendy Turner would not exist. But now it does and I am grateful. Thank you from the bottom of my heart! The lights dim for the final time on October 17, 2017. I look forward to the 2018 Teacher of the year being named. A year ago, I promised to represent our profession and the great state of Delaware with the utmost zeal, integrity and professionalism as possible in this opportunity. I am pleased with my performance. Stay tuned for the sequel. The work and the evolution will continue, as they should. What a wonderful audience you all have been.

The 2018 Teacher of the Year will be announced at the Teacher of the Year Banquet on Tuesday, October 17, 2017 at Dover Downs.