My name is Derlie Lee and I am the Choral Director at Bear Creek Middle School in Statham, GA. I had the pleasure of studying at Georgia Southern University - Armstrong Campus where I received a Bachelor of Music Education. I also completed a Master of Music Education this past summer at the University of Georgia. I am currently going into my fourth year of teaching and have had the opportunity to take students to All-State and LGPE.

1. What are some factors that drew you to teaching chorus?

Teaching chorus, and especially middle school chorus, is quite a beast of its own—but my favorite place to be no less. I didn't have an exact plan to be in a chorus classroom when I first went to college. During my undergrad, I dreamt a lot of the days I would teach elementary music. I watched the tribute movie to Mr. Roger's, "A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood," and knew that I wanted my first elementary lesson to include the title song. I did all of my teaching practicums in the elementary world and always thought of singing as the instrument so personally connected to our being. During my student teaching, I was encouraged by my Music Education advisor to step out of my comfort zone and try something new. My immediate thought was to try middle school chorus. I had participated in chorus throughout high school and even joined a few choral ensembles in college and loved the warm environment, so why not give it a go? I went on to spend four months with the most hilarious, intelligent, and hardworking group of students I had ever met and the most supportive mentor teacher who pushed me to build myself into the teacher I am today. I had the opportunity to challenge them in their aural skills and part singing skills. I then realized something very important that catapulted me into wanting to teach middle school chorus. These kids are still kids. They don't always act like it, as far as being silly goes, but they are still kids who want to experience the joy of being a kid. They are in this odd stage where they aren't very close to adulthood and they aren't so little anymore. They are discovering who they are, who they want their friends to be, and most of all, they want a place to feel safe being exactly who they are right now.

2. What are some challenges facing middle school teachers today and how do you overcome them?

Teaching in the middle school environment can be tough, especially as a new teacher. I feel that the biggest challenge is burn out. I know it has been said time and time again, but it's because it's a real and prevalent problem. To combat this feeling that "teaching is not a sustainable career," I make it sustainable. I listen to my body and mind for stress and fatigue and remind myself that it is not bad to take a step back or limit my responsibilities. I remind myself that just because another teacher may outwardly "do more" than myself, it doesn't mean I need to overexert myself to do the same, though I can cheer them on for all of their hardwork! What you decide to do as a teacher directly affects your students, but it also directly affects you. Know what you are putting on your plate, adjust as necessary, and your program will flourish from the care you have
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3. What's your favorite piece or lesson you have done since you've become a teacher?

I LOVE teaching students the foundations of sight reading. I found that this tends to be an area where students struggle or feel frustration the most, and my goal is to help them see how fun it actually can be! This certainly involves a lot of thinking outside-of-the-box and in my case, having them yell, whisper, sign solfege together as a team while I use an abnormally large pointer for our sight reading exercises on our highly-decorated (by students) document camera lovingly named IPEVO.

A piece I taught that always brings me joy when I think about it is "Reindeer Rap (Without Us, Santa's Nothing!)" by Sally K. Albrecht. The first time I taught it was with my first year of 7th graders. We spent quite a small amount of time actually learning the song and much more time making it our own! My students made a short script and performed it completely by themselves on stage for our Winter Concert. The energy they radiated was unmatched and contagious! I was so proud of the work they did as I sat with the audience for a moment and watched their electric personalities shine on stage. Definitely a piece and time to remember.

4. As a relatively new teacher, what is some advice you have for new music educators?

I can't say this enough--remember to shower yourself with the same love you have for your students. You can only be as great of a teacher as you allow yourself to be. Sometimes this means starting small and working your way up to what you can handle. It also means listening to your body and mind.

5.What advice do you have for someone still in college in regards to seeking their first job?

Your kids are waiting for you. All the time you spend in the practice room, take time to think of them. You are working to become a better musician for yourself and for them. I remember when times would get stressful in college, because having 11 classes in a semester is pretty normal for our brand, I would think of the bigger picture. One day, you're going to have a student come up to you and say "I want to be a choir teacher just like you one day" and you'll realize that a statement like that is simply the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the impact you'll make on the lives of your students. When looking into jobs, ask questions, research the schools you are interested in teaching in, but also know that there are students everywhere that need you as their teacher.

6. Who inspired you to become a music teacher?

Oh, how the list goes on! I want to mention my Band Director, Tim, who I will forever thank for igniting my passion for teaching music, mentoring me through my first years of teaching, and reminding me how fun can be made in even the smallest of moments. I want to thank my piano teacher through high school, Alex, who I told at the very last possible moment that I wanted to

prepare for my audition for college to become a music teacher--thank you for introducing me to Debussy. I want to thank my Piano Professor from Georgia Southern University - Armstrong Campus, Dr. Benjamin Warsaw, for his wise words that I have kept dear to my heart, specifically that I summarize to this day being "who you are as a musician is who you are as a person." I carry your words with me everyday and cherish every phone call. The list is never ending, but quite possibly the most inspirational people in my life are my parents. I want to thank you both for pushing me to pursue my dream of becoming a music teacher. You both inspire me everyday.

7. What kind of warm-ups or classroom management strategies do you use often at the middle school level?

Model everything, remind them frequently, do not let behaviors that cross your boundary slide (not even once) and remember all rules should be made to result in safety and a positive learning environment. Before the first day of school, take the time to write out exactly how you want the class day to go. If you are in the middle of the year, you can still make changes. You do not have to wait to make your classroom environment better.

I have openers every day that fall under the following categories: New Music Monday, Song Writing Tuesday, New Word Wednesday, Theory/Aural Skills Thursday, and Reflection Friday. Afterwards I will begin class with stretches (student-led), breathing exercises, and fun vocal warmups. My student's favorites have been: Alfred the Alligator, Fruit Cannon, Proper Cup of Coffee, Row Your Boat (with word subtractions), Solfege Cannons, Chocolate Cookie and Many Mumbling Mice. Of course there is a world of more exercises, and I encourage you to find and share as many as you can which choral teachers in your area!