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YELITZA AGUILERA

ELA and Social Studies

Ms. Yelitza Aguilera, a Washington Heights native, is proud to be teaching ELA and Social Studies at S2. She relates to her students: “I went to public schools in New York City my entire life and when I went to CUNY Binghamton I started to see the gaps I had based on my experience... I always did well in school but going to college I realized things I didn’t know or experiences I never had in high school or middle school, because I went to public schools in low income neighborhoods.” It was this realization that made her decide to become a teacher.



After graduating college and spending a year with AmeriCorps, Ms. Aguilera signed up for Teach for America and was placed at a well-known charter network in Harlem. She spent five years there, teaching in a very strict environment, and became increasingly concerned that she wasn’t effectively addressing the needs of her students. Ms. Aguilera decided to take a break from teaching, maybe for good. She went on, “I left teaching and did a nonprofit role for a year, but I didn’t like the work ... so I was considering what I wanted to do next. I found School in the Square... and when I saw their vision and that they were in Washington Heights, that’s what really drew me to them. I wasn’t actively looking to teach again, but the mission of School in the Square made me decide to give it another try.”

In addition to her core subjects, S2 has supported Ms. Aguilera’s desire to cultivate her interest in mindfulness for the benefit of the school. She explained: “The school funded this training through the organization Breathe for Change that had a huge impact on my life. I’ve been trying to incorporate some of those things in my classroom...” She sees the importance of mindfulness and breathing exercises for her students, especially given the stress that comes from working through educational gaps and living in low income neighborhoods. She is excited to do more with her training next year and wants to help her fellow teachers gain a deeper understanding of mindfulness so they can incorporate the practice in their classrooms. She went on, “It’s really nice, you can grow in the areas that you want to be an expert in... I got to help with Prime Time [S2’s mindfulness homeroom class], some other teachers have helped with recruitment or Forum, so you can explore other skills that you want to build outside of teaching.”

At S2, Ms. Aguilera feels she has been given the tools to really help her students, which has re-energized her passion for teaching. “I have stronger relationships with students here... and I feel like the kids are more bought-in. I have less discipline issues in my classroom here because there’s room for me to make decisions on how I follow up with students...” She also appreciates working in smaller classes, “I’m able to give more attention and it’s easier to track kids when you have fewer students”. She told one story of a student who struggled in the beginning of the year: “... he came in reading below grade level and he really struggled in the beginning of the year. He would space out a lot and be confused, not really asking questions, so I would have come over to him and figure out what was missing. But there was a shift in him, I guess with the persistence of my co-teacher and I, and about halfway through the year he just started to take more ownership. Now he’s the student who’s always looking for feedback, getting



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up and looking for the teacher. So, he's someone that I feel really good about, because I see how much he's growing, taking ownership, and standing up for himself when he needs help. He struggles but he works so hard."

When asked if there was anything else about the school that she really appreciates, she said "I love how creative our students are and I think I'm able to see that because we give them space to do that... It's nice to see them in that light. That's one thing that I really love about the school, that kids share their creativity with us, they feel comfortable, which isn't always the case." Ms. Aguilera is so glad to have found a school where she can teach students holistically, and she is grateful to be giving back to her own community.

