

Delaware Teacher of the Year: Visiting Cooper's horizon



My family and I live in Rehoboth Beach, DE, and spend each summer visiting our favorite spots along the Atlantic Ocean in Sussex County. Attracted to the tides, the waves, the calm and the consistency of the water's presence, my sons, my husband and I use these spaces to laugh, to exercise, to commune and to reflect.

One of my most treasured memories of our time on the beach, however, occurred when my youngest son was about five or six. After spending almost an hour sitting on the jetty rocks, looking out over the horizon, Cooper made his way back to where my husband and I sat. My husband, always the consummate observer, could tell that Cooper had something on his mind, so he asked him what he'd been thinking about as he sat on those rocks overlooking the seascape. Through his bleached blond eyelashes, my kiddo looked at us and said, "You know that line where the sea meets the sky? I thought about what I'd find if I went there."

This past year, as Delaware's 2018 Teacher of the Year, I feel like I had the chance to visit the space my son imagined on that summer day: the space where inspiration and curiosity abound, where challenges and experiences prompt self-discovery and untapped strength, where sunrises offers a new opportunity to make a difference, and sunsets prompt the rest and reflection necessary to keep doing the important work that benefits the children in our schools and in our communities.

After overcoming the initial shock of being named DE STOY (and please know that I still struggle with imposter syndrome when in the company of so many exemplary educators in our state and from around

the nation), I began my journey toward fearless leadership and increased advocacy. And while I've always valued and embraced these skills, employing them on a state-wide level was completely new. Former TOYs like Wendy Turner (2017), Sandra Hall (2016), and Megan Szabo (2015) were just a few of the teacher leaders who tried to ready me for the year in store. Nothing, however, could have prepared me for my first meeting held by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) in California with the 2018 National Teachers of the Year cohort.

The whole experience was nutso. I'm serious. I was hanging with educational professionals who'd already written and published books, who'd led for racial equity on a national stage, whose impressive resumes made me feel like a Shetland pony in the Kentucky Derby. I had so much to learn from these compassionate, innovative, and gloriously welcoming hearts belonging to educators I now call dear friends and confidantes.

Exhausting and transformative, my time in California solidified what I already knew about this noble profession: teachers are total and absolute rock stars who need more resources and support to help students thrive, and ALL learners benefit when ALL perspectives are valued. Why, then, did I need to go to all the way to CA if I already understood the goals CCSSO was trying to fulfill? Because when one is truly valued, when professional development is housed at Google (that place is magical... for real), when collaboration results in a nation-wide push for equitable outcomes, when heartfelt tears and giggles, that can make your bones hurt, start and end each day, one feels like she just might be able to change the world. So, I came back to our state, and I was ready. Ready to lead DE schools in a direction that embraces culturally responsive teaching and implement strategies that deny institutionalized racism.

In my past 22 years as an English teacher, I've committed myself to cultural proficiency as I've devoted my days to listening and learning from the valuable voices in my classroom. Fostering an environment that encourages individual truths and communal acceptance, I rejoice when students deny and overcome, with tremendous strength, the pervasive biases that injure and often halt the progress of our Black and Brown children. And while we celebrate growth and progress, there is work to be done.

Supporting me each step of the way this year, DOE's beloved and devoted TOY coordinator Chris Kenton graciously drove me all over the state as I spoke to pre-service teachers, worked with doctoral candidates, presented to the House and the Senate, trained with DOE staff, and advocated for necessary training in my own district. I've also had the indelible pleasure of learning from the influential and tireless commitments of racial equity leaders like Faye Blake, Jacques Bowe and Maria Stecker. Their vital contributions change lives, for they know that the equity lens is the tool that all district, building and teacher leaders must look through when dismantling the systems that have historically hurt our youth.

And please know that if this lens is ignored, we will continue to blindly dismiss so many beautiful hearts and minds that have so very much to offer.

In October, I will attend the DE STROY banquet that names the next winner of this humbling award. I will offer advice to the blessed educator who is in for a life-changing year, and publicly thank the state for bestowing this incredible honor on me, a gal from Felton, DE who loves books and yoga and belly laughs. I will leave that banquet with my sons and my husband, knowing that it is my responsibility to help every child visit her/his version of Cooper's horizon. And I will wake up the next morning, ready to learn and grow from the kiddos who await me in room 837.