

Bowe: 'I am a better teacher because I am an advocate'



West Seaford Elementary special education teacher Dana Bowe reflected on what she learned serving as Delaware's 2019 State Teacher of the Year during her final speech as Delaware Teacher of the Year.

Editor's note: The following is the script of the speech delivered by 2019 Delaware Teacher of the Year Dana Bowe at the 2020 Teacher of the Year awards ceremony.

It was one year ago - the announcement right here at Dover Downs- "The 2019 Delaware State Teacher of the Year, from the Seaford School District- Dana Bowe."

It was a blurry moment.

What I do remember clearly was hearing the cheers from my family and friends, the board, my administration, my staff, and all of the families of children with special needs. Through the blur and the noise, I definitely felt wrapped in community spirit! I wasn't sure what was happening, or how it even happened, but I knew IT was something big.

Then, there were the photos and the interviews. You could see what I thought, what I felt, in every photo posted all over the internet and news. I learned pretty quickly that this honor would include speaking engagements, and at that time, I didn't believe that my voice deserved to be heard. Fortunately, I did believe that MY STUDENTS DESERVED TO BE SEEN AND THEIR VOICES BE HEARD. With guidance and support from so many wonderful people around me, I started sharing; sharing their

powerful stories, using their voices, while I grew the courage to develop my message, and my voice. It was now time to raise awareness about inclusion and acceptance!

I shared Wayne's story this year.

Wayne with the most beautiful blue eyes, but when he started my class, his eyes seemed to look right through me. He was nonverbal and he didn't like having a speech generating IPAD device. He often threw it across the room. There were days Wayne cried and days that I cried. I had to learn how to listen- truly listen without hearing any words. I eventually learned that Wayne liked dominos, trains and anything that moved and I started incorporating his interests into my lessons. Wayne also liked my frog puppet, Moe. Moe would hop up and down and Wayne would laugh. Hearing Wayne's laughter was the best sound ever. One day, Moe, the frog puppet, asked Wayne, "Do you want a high five, fist bump, or a hug?" Just then, Wayne turned his device on and typed "h-u-g." It wasn't easy getting to know Wayne. It was really hard-- but once I learned how to listen to Wayne- I saw his greatness. Wayne could speed read, recognize over 100 sight words, and motivate us to dance and jump to hear his laughter and joy. I am not sure if I entered his world, or he entered mine. Either way- I finally heard Wayne's voice.

I also shared Ada's story. Ada who waited at the door to welcome students into West Seaford Elementary School each morning. 'Good morning buddy, have a great day! Be awesomesauce!' Ada is uplifting, authentic, and her laughter is contagious! Her parents are leaders in the Down Syndrome Association of Delaware's message that we are more alike than different. Ada passes on this message through her modeling of acceptance and kindness. She does not see that she works twice as hard as her typical peer classmates in school. She will play or talk with any person she meets without prejudice or seemingly noticing the differences that others see so easily. We can learn so much from Ada. Ada is capable of changing mindsets, helping us see that we, all of us, are more alike than different.

Students who receive special education are capable of greatness! These are just a couple of the many stories I could share. We must encourage true inclusion with acceptance and kindness. We must see our children without labels and limitations. We must teach ALL students!

I thought I was doing this, encouraging inclusion, acceptance, and kindness. I truly believed it. I saw their greatness, I saw their capabilities, but that isn't necessarily enough to encourage the same in others. A few weekends ago, I went to a yard sale in town and a previous student's grandmother walked over to me. I really liked the student and thought she was beautiful and bright. I shared my memory with the grandmother and reminded her that I worked in her granddaughter's regular education classroom second grade.

The grandmother said, "Oh, that was the year, they put a nonverbal child in her class. He would make noises- she could barely think and she loves to read." I couldn't believe my ears and I could literally feel my heart dropping and even anger arise from my body.

But I was polite and all I could barely muster “That was my student.” She went on, “These team classrooms with special education students. We need to go back to tracking for our top kids.” I had to walk away because I wasn’t even sure what to say in that moment. How could someone be so cold? So close-minded? Her words continued to play over and over again in my head- until I eventually burst into tears- realizing for the first time, not everyone sees the beauty in diversity, the abilities of those with disabilities, and humanity of each human.

I failed that little girl, the granddaughter. I saw my student’s greatness but I NEVER helped her to see it too. That little girl went home and didn’t tell her grandmother how her classmate who didn’t speak words- could laugh out loud when someone told a joke! How he could answer a multiple choice test on grade level by smiling when he heard the correct choice. How he could lift his arms out of his wheelchair to give the very best hugs. I didn’t teach her those noises he made- he was simply trying to communicate. It was my first year teaching special education and I didn’t know that just because I thought he was amazing wasn’t enough. I needed to create more knowledge- which would have lead to more acceptance. Then maybe, just maybe, she could have learned compassion, understanding, humor, and so much more from him. Because Yes- a child with special needs can teach a child in regular education just as much as a child in regular education can teach a child with special needs.

My hope is that you will all be aware that there is beauty to see in every child, that all children have capabilities. It hurts me knowing that little girl missed out on her classmate’s abilities and greatness. I have become a better teacher since that first year because I have become an advocate for my students. I am a Special Olympics coach; I created a Choose to Include Club at our school where each homeroom has a leader to spread the awareness about disabilities by shining the light on abilities; Our school joined the Spread the Word to End the R Word campaign; We held district-wide celebrations to “Rock Our Socks” celebrating World Down syndrome Day; We sing songs about friendship and perform at community events for Autism; We watch documentaries about real kids and their special needs; We learn how to communicate with our friends who have AAC devices; We purchased books that show strong and empowering characters who have disabilities!

I’ve shared a lot with you today, about my students; my students who receive special education services and have me as their special education teacher. Sometimes, that’s how they are thought of, as just my students, as special education students; but really, they are OUR students, they are YOUR students as much as MINE. They are not visitors to a class, they are part of the class, even if they aren’t there the whole day. They aren’t students that inhabit only certain parts of the school, they are a part of the school, like every other student that attends. EVERY CHILD IS OUR CHILD IN OUR SCHOOLS! WE MUST ADVOCATE FOR ALL OF THEM!!! Raising awareness is not enough! So to each of you here tonight, educators, district teachers of the year, administrators, leaders, and community members- Please use your voice to be an ADVOCATE for those who need us!

I am a better teacher because I am an advocate. I will continue to get better- the longer I teach and the more I learn. And although my year as the 2019 Delaware State Teacher of the Year is coming to an end- I AM JUST GETTING STARTED!!!