

By Bill Husfelt

Superintendent, Bay District Schools

In our final spotlight on some of our amazing alternative certification teachers, we're highlighting the hard work of a few of our elementary team members.

Kierra Robbins, who is in her second year of teaching, came to teaching by way of anthropology and forensics. "I have a Bachelor's in Sociology and a Bachelor's in Anthropology from the University of Florida. I was accepted into Boston University's School of Medicine Forensic Anthropology program, and intended to go into forensics, but the logistics to get me there did not work out. I was working at an after-school program at a Montessori school and fell in love with that style of teaching," she said. When her husband's military orders stationed them in Bay County, she was almost immediately hired as an elementary teacher at Northside Elementary School.

Kierra said she's honored to be considered a #HometownHero and feels privileged to work with the children of our community every day. "I fell in love with teaching and I know without a shadow of a doubt that this is my career. My passion is child development and how children learn, perceive the world, and how we can help them grow in the best way possible," she said. "There is so much more to education than reading and math, although those are highly important. We as educators help them regulate their emotions, build relationships, think critically, assume responsibility for things, show respect, properly communicate, and so much more. I have realized that slowing down and speaking to children with respect has a much better outcome and I am already seeing drastic changes in my class this year with how they process things and communicate with each other."

Lea Gunter, a Pre-K Autism teacher at the newly-reopened Oscar Patterson Academy is another teacher who didn't start out with that career in mind. "I have a degree in Professional Communication. I was a paraprofessional for several years working with students with special needs," she said. "After college, I went on to work with the Department of Corrections but after hearing about the alternative certification program from my sister who is a teacher in Bay County, I immediately applied and took a position as a second-grade teacher last year."

Working with students who have special needs is very motivating to Lea. "This year I moved into the field I am most passionate about and am working with students with autism. Seeing their smiles and their 'aha' moments is my why. Teaching is truly the most rewarding experience and best decision of my life."

Kristy Ruppel also has a degree in Professional Communications but says she has found her home in an Autism Classroom at Deer Point Elementary School. "I started teaching the year of the pandemic which was right after our Hurricane Michael year, so it was tough and has continued to be tough," she said. "However, the thing that has made me stay in the classroom is being able to see my students make progress and achieve goals. I enjoy creating an atmosphere of love and calm in my classroom when the world is having difficult times. I enjoy watching my students walk the stage for graduation and move on to middle school knowing that I had a hand

in getting them to that milestone. I enjoy creating special bonds with my students so when they see me out in the community they want to come over and say hello,” she added.

The camaraderie between colleagues is also an important benefit for Kristy. “My colleagues are another reason why I have chosen to stay in the classroom. Having a solid team around me to help lift me up when everything was so difficult made me want to come back to keep working with them as well,” she said.

A chance encounter with a former mentor brought Kathleen McNulty Mann into education more than 15 years ago. “In college, I studied Political Science and Educational Policy. I was working in the non-profit world and didn't like my current position when I ran into Carol Ann Whitehurst who had mentored me at Bay High when I was involved in theatre there. She hadn't seen me in years but told me she always thought I should be a teacher,” Kathleen explained. “It was October, and they were hiring at Arnold High School where she was the Assistant Principal. I started less than two weeks later after rushing to take the certification test for ESE and English.”

Kathleen later took a break from teaching to help her family's business but returned to J.R. Arnold High School to teach Advanced Placement Art and AP Capstone courses. Last year, she left the high school world to join the team at Merriam Cherry Street Elementary School as an art teacher.

The best part of a career in education, Kathleen said, is the opportunity to build relationships with students. “My favorite and best inspiration is when students come back to me years and years later and tell me what they still use from what I taught them. I've had former students become published playwrights, create art far beyond our community, have an international influence on social issues, go into the military, become entrepreneurs, and I've even seen many become teachers,” she said. “They all inspire me and push me to want to continue to be my best for them and for all of my students I have yet to meet.”

As a side note, Kathleen encouraged her mother to return to college and graduate with a Bachelor's Degree at age 60. Carolyn McNulty is now in her third year as a teacher for BDS and teaches math to students with special needs at Surfside Middle School. Carolyn says she's teaching exactly what she wanted to teach at her dream school and she couldn't be more excited and grateful for the opportunity.

Thank you for supporting our efforts to appreciate ALL of our teachers and to highlight the accomplishments of a few of those who have come to teaching via non-traditional paths. In the past three weeks, we've heard from almost 20 Bay County residents who are interested in exploring this career option and we're incredibly grateful.

We invite anyone interested in getting started on the path toward certification to email us at BDScomm@bay.k12.fl.us so we can answer questions and outline the steps. This is a GREAT time to step up and give back to our community, and our children, and we're grateful for all of those civic-minded citizens who are answering this need.

Stay safe and God Bless!

