



Fall 2010

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Recommended Citation

Zeller Julian '07, Sarah (2010) "From Concept to Classroom," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, 2002-2017*: Vol. 19 : Iss. 3 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol19/iss3/9>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact iwumag@iwu.edu.

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From Concept to Classroom

A diverse background inspires Molly Myers' decision to educate.

Story by SARAH (ZELLER) JULIAN '07



For Molly Myers, working with special needs children has become a passion — one she says was an easy decision from the start.

“I’ve always wanted to go where I’m needed most,” the 2001 Illinois Wesleyan graduate says. “I’ve always been for the underdogs.” When she finishes her second master’s degree this year, Molly will return with a project to help increase other teachers’ effectiveness at the New York City public school where she taught for five years.

Myers (above) says the moments she shares with her students "are my driving force."

educator at New York City’s P.S. X176, a school in the Bronx made up of 700 students with autism, from ages 3 to 21. Her experiences with sociology, documentaries, travel and education have inspired her post-graduate decisions.

Molly took a less-than-traditional route to becoming an

Molly entered IWU as a 16-year-old after graduating early from her Normal, Ill., high school. At Illinois Wesleyan, she majored in sociology and says she was inspired by the anthropology lab that opened at IWU while she was a student. “That’s when I really got into documentary-style sociological work,” she says. Professor of Sociology Jim Sikora urged her on. “He was really influential for me as far as the path I took after IWU.”

After graduation, Molly completed a semester program at the Salt Institute for Documentary Studies in Portland, Maine, where she concentrated on photography. “It totally changed my world,” she says. “That’s where I really learned to hone the art of storytelling, of studying people.”

In 2003, she was accepted into the New York City Teaching Fellows, a program that pays for master’s degrees in education for participants who teach in high-needs city schools. Inspired by family members who have worked in special education, she accepted a job teaching elementary

education at P.S. X176 and fell in love with her work. “I was hooked,” she says. “Immediately, I realized that this was the place for me. It was just in my character to work with these kids.”

To further her professional interests, Molly earned a certification in special needs education from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, a prestigious certification held by only 3 percent of teachers in the country. The lengthy process involved a portfolio and exams and also required Molly to film herself teaching. Given her history with documentaries, the video requirement sparked Molly’s interest. “I don’t know why teachers don’t do this,” she thought after seeing herself on video and gaining insight into what works — and what doesn’t — in the classroom. “That was really interesting to see myself on video for 10 hours,” she says. “It was the most useful thing I had ever done.”

With that concept in mind, Molly took a year off teaching to complete a second master’s degree, this one in educational leadership from New York University. “I feel like I’ve pulled my experience with sociology, my documentary experience and my teaching experience to where it’s really all making sense for me professionally,” she says.

This fall, Molly returned to P.S. X176 as a behavior specialist instead of a classroom teacher. The new position, created specifically for her, will allow Molly to do the practical research to support her ideas about video feedback for teachers. “Five teachers are volunteering; we’re going to set up cameras and microphones in their classrooms, and we’re going to film crucial moments in the classroom over the year,” she explains. The teachers will then review the videos with therapists and other specialists who will help with professional development and classroom techniques. “Basically, I get to try out what I think will work,” Molly says. “Hopefully, they’re going to share this with their colleagues. People can literally sit down, watch the video and hopefully get a new perspective.”

Molly is also interested in influencing educational policy, especially after spending time this summer in South Africa, where she studied education and social reform as part of her NYU master’s degree program. “It gave me a much wider experience on disparity in education,” she says. But the country’s post-apartheid policy changes also gave Molly hope. “It was such a rich experience — how schools can in fact reform themselves, how a country can make decisions to make policy decisions and change the way people live.”

She has already become involved in local and statewide education policymaking, as well as serving on committees for Autism Speaks and the Autism Society of America. “In New York, you have lots of chances to get involved. My future goals are really to build professional development opportunities into the public school system. I hope to make a living out of it in the nonprofit sector.”

Through it all, the special needs children Molly has worked with remain her inspiration. “Although the kids don’t get perfect scores or go to the best schools when they graduate, the ability to tie your shoe or say ‘I love you’ to your parents — those moments are my driving force,” she says. “It’s hard to get away from when you first get started. I love the kids; there’s so much joy to be had. It’s forced me to think differently about my own existence.”