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Young Alumna Reflects on First Years As Teacher

May 16, 2011

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – On Friday, April 29, Illinois Wesleyan alumna Amy Grelck '09 bravely led her class into The Battle of the Books, a district-wide, literary trivia competition. The fifth graders from John Muir Literacy Academy (JMLA) of Hoffman Estates, Ill. fought valiantly and, in the end, emerged triumphant.

Grelck has been preparing her students for this victory all year in the Battle of the Books after-school reading club she established last year. The program, she notes, “got the kids motivated and excited about reading,” which would be considered a success by any teacher, but is especially meaningful for Grelck.



Grelck, Class of 2009, works with a group of her fifth grade students.

In the past, JMLA has struggled with students reading below grade level. Grelck, who is completing her second year at the elementary school, explains that this is common in schools like John Muir that have low-income, transient student populations. In fact, JMLA has a 20 percent mobility rate.

“This is challenging because children who move frequently are typically far behind in reading and math,” said Grelck, “I might work really hard with one of my students, but he or she will move before I get to see any real progress.”

Grelck, a native of Palatine, Ill, says she feels most rewarded when she is able to see a tangible success, such as improved test scores or on-time homework. However, her favorite part of being a teacher is being able to “play a small part in helping children become the people they will grow up to be.”

While a student at Illinois Wesleyan, she developed a peace education program as part of her Senior Seminar project. “I think teachers have an opportunity to work for change by promoting peace and conflict resolution with children,” she said.

Grelck brings these ideas into her classroom where she encourages conversations and reads books about peace and social justice. Still, she believes the greatest lesson she learned at IWU is the importance of building relationships with her students.

“Forming positive relationships with students and letting them know you care about them needs to happen before any learning can take place,” she said. For Grelck, getting along with her students is easily done. “I love the fifth grade,” she said, “They have so much personality at this age. I love sharing book recommendations with the kids and practicing writing creative stories.”

Sometimes the realities of teaching weigh heavily on the young teacher. “I am constantly challenged with the reality of the great need in my classroom and my own limitations. Some of my students need so much academically, emotionally and economically, and there is so much I want to do to help them, but there is only so much I can do. It can be emotional, caring so much about the kids and not being able to give them all that you know they need,” she said.

Daily struggles combined with low salaries and a feeling of being under-appreciated often leads to a phenomenon called teacher “burn-out,” a trend where new teachers seem to leave the profession within their first few years. While Grelick is frank about the more difficult parts of her job, for her, the good will always outweigh the bad.

“A part of me wishes that teaching was easier, or paid more or that we received more recognition, but I will keep teaching regardless of whether or not those things ever change, because it is so much a part of who I am,” she said.

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