



NH CIVICS

Mary Susan Leahy Civics Educator Award Winner Announced!



Three cheers for Holly Wilson, a social studies teacher at Weare Middle School, who was selected to receive the first-ever Mary Susan Leahy Civics Educator Award! The award is given to the New Hampshire K-12 educator who excels at teaching civics and who has taken on state-wide leadership in civics education. The award is sponsored by the NH Council of the Social Studies (NHCSS) and NH Civics. NH Civics' intern, Isaiah Winnettknoy, recently sat down with Holly. Read on!

What are the biggest challenges facing you and other Civics and Social Studies Educators in NH?

Oh Boy. So, I would say the biggest challenges civics educators are facing today revolve around the politics in the state right now and laws regarding how we look at history. But I also think that civics has never been more popular, and it's actually in a way a really good thing that our politics are forcing people to have difficult conversations. Those difficult conversations come into my classroom, so that's been a challenge, but I've taken professional development through NH Civics to help me address those difficulties and help students be open and understanding, realize that issues and opposing views aren't black and white, and that we are all human and vulnerable.

Did you always know you wanted to be a teacher and, if not, when did you realize this was a calling you wanted to pursue?

I always knew I wanted to be a teacher, but I tried to pursue other things in college because there was lots of pressure from my family not to be a teacher. But by sophomore year I knew I wanted to be a teacher. I always wanted to help make the world a better place and I thought this was the single most important way to do it.

What was your inspiration for choosing civics then? Were you always a humanities kid or did you grow into it?

I always loved social studies, especially political science. A lot of schools didn't have a civics curriculum, so I would just incorporate it into the US history class I taught at the high school level for a while. When the job I'm in opened up though, it was specifically to teach civics to 7th graders, and I knew I wanted that. Definitely a match made in heaven.

If you had to pick just one thing from your class you'd want your students to be passionate about, what would it be?

I would want them to be passionate about the fact that they can make a difference in this world. We live in a country where the first three words of the constitution are "we the people." We control what happens, and we don't have to sit back and let unfair laws be passed, live with the potholes in the road, or be unhappy with public education, for example. We can be involved in government in lots of different ways, and I want my students to realize their power, and I hope they would want to make change for the better starting right now. They'll have more power when they're older, but I want them to feel like the country is theirs.

If you had to enter either the New Hampshire state government or the US government, which would you choose, and what position do you think you could do well in?

Definitely state government over national, and I would be in the House of Representatives. The why is partially that there are more of them because of how the government is set up, but I feel like you can make almost more of a difference at a local level too.

What is your favorite lesson to teach and why? Also, if you have a least favorite thing to teach we'd love to hear that too.

Well my favorite thing to teach is definitely the Declaration of Independence. I pretend I found a love letter on the floor, rewritten into 7th grade "love language," and I pretend like I'm not supposed to read it. Obviously, the letter is written from the American colonists to King George III, but the kids totally jump into it. All I really need them to know is it's a breakup letter, they'll study it more in high school, but this is a really fun intro to that. My least favorite lesson isn't really a lesson, but it's when kids shout out in my classroom things like "black lives matter" and "all lives matter" and then I have to stop what I'm doing and address it, because it's something you just can't blow off. It goes for any political agenda too. It's moments like that I hate, but it's my job to educate these kids about things like this. Though that's not part of my curriculum it's something I face every year.

My next question for you is what is the most satisfying or gratifying moment for you personally as a teacher?

I think the most satisfying thing for me is when a student starts to believe in themselves. I think the job of middle school teachers is to make children love learning, because they're making up their mind at that point if they're going to graduate high school, or college, or what their future is like. Things like that are being decided by middle schoolers - if they feel like they're good at school or not - so I really want kids to feel successful. One particular kid comes to mind who hated school, didn't do work, and didn't believe in himself, so I had to find different ways for him to engage in the work. Fair enough, he didn't like taking notes, so we had to find more creative ways for him to learn and engage, and I encourage my students to tell me how they learn best so I can make accommodations for them.

It seems like figuring out how each student learns is like cracking a little puzzle.

Yeah! And it's so satisfying watching kids feel good about themselves. But it's really not me, it's because the kids started to believe in themselves, and I maybe gave them a unique avenue to do it. I get a couple of those kids every year, and it's always really satisfying.

Kind of along a similar line, do you feel like you have a greatest achievement?

One of the greatest achievements of my life is definitely winning civics teacher of the year, to be honest. I have the qualifications to be a principal or with a little more work a superintendent, but I don't want to climb the ladder like that. I wanted to be the best teacher I could be, got recognized for that, and that's all I really ever wanted.

I think the fact you don't want to climb the ladder, and as you said before want to do the most good in the world, is reason enough for winning civics teacher of the year.

Well it really has meant so much to me to win this award, especially in light of the political climate, so I'm extremely thankful.

What advice might you have for teachers next year to help them win their own civics educator of the year awards?

I'd say nominate your peers more. Schools should boost their teachers up and say, "hey we have some great teachers here," and the same goes for other teachers. I'm surrounded by amazing teachers, so I would say promote your peers and succeed yourself in the process!

Congratulations, Holly!!