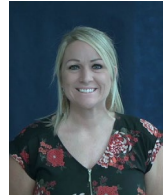


Alachua County's Teacher of the Year finalists are focused on more than curriculum

They teach different subjects at different grade levels at different schools, but the three finalists for Alachua County's Teacher of the Year program all have a similar philosophy--their students need to know that their teachers care about them.

Elementary School Teacher of the Year Kasey Norris is in her second year as a 5th-grade teacher at Alachua Elementary School, but she's been working with children for more than a decade as both a teacher and as an early interventionist for children with developmental disabilities or delays. Her students made dramatic gains in math, language arts and science during her first year at Alachua, and she had similar academic success when she taught in South Carolina.



But Norris says her goals for her students go beyond content and benchmarks.

"I want them to become thinkers, people who can figure things out," she said. "I also want them to know that they're not alone, that I'm here to support them and that I have their backs."

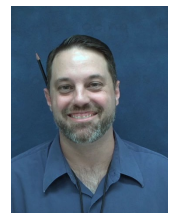


Kirk Tapley is this year's Middle School Teacher of the Year. He's been teaching Advanced World History at Howard Bishop Middle School for three and a half years. He's a big believer in both authenticity and relevance in the classroom. His alter ego DJ Globe Up regularly makes an appearance in the classroom to rap and reinforce previous lessons. Then there's 'Life Skill Friday,' a once-a-month lesson in such practical skills as interviewing for a job, balancing a checkbook or even changing a tire.

Whatever the content, the message Tapley shares with his students every day is that their teacher loves them.

"Through relentlessly loving my students and designing a curriculum where they can see how it ties into their future, I believe I'm on a path to creating a space where students feel safe and are excited to come on a daily basis," said Tapley.

The 2020 High School Teacher of the Year is Josh Forgione, a social studies teacher who has spent his entire 15-year career at Gainesville High School. Beside his work in the classroom, Forgione has also been actively involved with students in a wide variety of extra-curricular activities, including sports and academic teams and service clubs. For example, he coached GHS' Moot Court Team to the national championship in 2015. Under his direction, GHS students presented potential solutions to equity related issues to Gainesville Mayor Lauren Poe and other city commissioners last summer.



Like his fellow finalists, Forgione too is committed to forging a strong bond with his students.

(more)

“I hope they’ll learn economics and basic life skills like personal finance,” he said. “But I also want them to get the idea that I care about them, and that my classroom is a safe place where even if they have questions that aren’t about academics, they can come and ask and be supported.”

Norris, Tapley and Forgione will be recognized at the annual Alachua County Teacher of the Year event on January 30, along with the district’s other teacher of the year nominees, one from each school. The event which is hosted by The Education Foundation and sponsored by Cox Communications, SWI Photography and Florida Credit Union, will include remarks from all three finalists, who will be introduced by their students. The event will end with the announcement of the 2020 Alachua County Teacher of the Year, who will go on to represent the district in the Florida Teacher of the Year program.

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