

New Alachua County Teacher of the Year says he was born to teach

During his remarks at the 2020 Robert W. Hughes Teacher of the Year celebration, Howard Bishop Middle School social studies teacher Kirk Tapley shared a favorite quote from pastor and author Bishop T.D. Jakes: “I would hate to die and have never done the thing that I was born to do.”

“I feel so blessed that for the last four years I have been able to partake in what I was placed on this earth to do, which is educate students while inspiring them to figure out what they are great at and to chase it relentlessly,” said Tapley.



At the celebration, Tapley was named the district’s 2020 Teacher of the Year by former Alachua County Public Schools Superintendent Robert W. Hughes, who established the district’s recognition program back in 1992. The announcement was greeted with enthusiastic cheers from Tapley’s students, family and friends, Bishop colleagues and a room full of teachers from schools throughout Alachua County.

Tapley was one of forty teachers, one from each of the district’s schools, who were honored at the annual event. That includes fellow-finalists Kasey Norris from Alachua Elementary School and Josh Forgione of Gainesville High School, who also gave impassioned speeches about the challenges and joys of teaching. Each of the three finalists was introduced by current or former students who talked about the impact the teachers had on their education and lives.

Tapley’s passion for reaching and teaching his students takes many forms, including an alter ego he calls DJ Globe Up, who uses customized rap songs to reinforce material learned in the classroom. In addition to the standard history curriculum, he shares monthly ‘practical’ lessons on everything from changing a tire to interviewing for a job. He’s a regular at his students’ extracurricular activities. He also begins and ends class each day with a reminder to his students that he loves them, a practice he says is based on a quote from Theodore Roosevelt that says people don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.

“I make sure to dedicate time every day to invest in students, not only the ones in my classroom, but those who come to Bishop every single day,” he said. “Because I invest in my students, they are willing to work for me.”

Tapley’s selection as the district’s teacher of the year is a story with some interesting twists. For example, as a student at Bishop he took classes in the same room in which he now teaches. And

when he was named a finalist in this year’s program, he shared with his students a photo taken in 2011 of then-Teacher of the Year Mike Testa. The student who can be most clearly identified in that photo is Tapley himself.



To the hundreds of teachers gathered at the ceremony, Tapley acknowledged the challenges of the profession.

“Yes, teaching is exhausting,” he said. “But at the end of the day it’s all worth it, because there’s no better exhaustion than the ‘we just changed lives,’ kind of exhaustion.”

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