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Academy guides Lanphier seniors toward teaching

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Coady Petropolous kicks off his sandals and sends a yellow kickball flying.

A line of pigtailed swing around and tiny wrists adorned by floppy Silly Bandz bracelets shoot in the air in disgust.

"Why did you do that?" whines a boy, sporting untrimmed blond hair and a left earring, during the third inning of a recess kickball game Monday at Wilcox Elementary School, 2000 Hastings Road.

"I didn't want to hit anyone!" Coady retorts.

The 17-year-old looks a little out of place among the sea of popping fourth-graders, standing about 2 feet taller than all of them. Coady leisurely plays with the group, catching high-fly balls and gingerly throwing them to the kids.

And he's in charge. Sort of.

Every afternoon, Coady teaches Tina Burton's fifth-grade students the rules of kickball while out on the playground, and the rules of reading, writing and arithmetic in the classroom.

He pays special attention to 10-year-old Brandon Koke, recently helping him individually with spelling. Coady says he sees a lot of himself in Brandon when he was the same age.

Coady is one of 10 Lanphier High School seniors enrolled in the school's teaching academy course — a yearlong class that takes a handful of students who show interest in becoming teachers and provides hands-on, daily classroom experience.

The course, now in its fourth year, also facilitates a chance to enter a small-but-mighty program at the University of Illinois Springfield that all but ensures a full-time teaching position with a local school district.

The opportunity is one that Coady, and most of his classmates, take seriously. But pressures outside of Lanphier, and outside the elementary school classrooms where they learn some teaching skills, sometimes compete with the students' goals.

When Coady's older brother was arrested recently and charged with burglary, Coady's school attendance stopped being consistent.

"For a while, I missed a lot (of school)," he said. But the goal of becoming the first in his family to attend college spurred his interest in attending classes. His teachers helped, too.

Issues like Coady's sometimes require administrators with the teaching academy and UIS to become more than just teachers. If all goes well, the academy's students someday may find themselves on the other end of that relationship.

She never stopped teaching

The halls of Lanphier High School are mostly bare, with a few motivational decorations that say, "You Are College Material," or reassure student passersby that making mistakes is forgivable.

Around 1 p.m. on a late October Wednesday, teacher Deborah Huffman opens the door to the textbook storage room at Lanphier — her classroom.

She takes her post at the end of her second-floor hallway, toward the eastern-most side of the sprawling, L-shaped building.

Soon, students fly by the svelte brunette, some mill around and others stay inside classrooms despite the bell's ring signaling the end of fifth hour.

The students in Huffman's Lanphier Teaching Academy class trickle in, taking their seats in desks with decorated construction-paper nametags. Chatter between the students is comfortable, and Huffman is their first stop before moving on to each other.

"I can't go to Wilcox (Elementary) today, Mrs. Huffman," Corey Todd says, shoulders slumped. "My truck wouldn't go — it's still stuck."

Corey sits at his desk and collapses over a bag stuffed with a costume he wears while volunteering at the Springfield Jaycees Haunted House.

Cluttered together in desks shoved against filing cabinets and stacks of textbooks, Corey and his classmates listen to Huffman as she begins the class period with a lecture on punctuality.

"You can't stop in the library," Huffman says from her desk, which is a student's desk parked in front of the designated teacher's desk, facing the half-circle of students staring back at her. "We are so limited on time ... it's like going late to any class. ... (Being on time) is a sign to me that you guys are really into (the class)."

But this is as iron-fisted as Huffman gets. She continues the class period with a spirited discussion about ways to motivate students by using incentives.

The lecture stems from Huffman reading from "Tools for Teaching" by Fred Jones. She mentions the fact that Lanphier may have an unusually high percentage of freshmen who are failing a significant number of their classes after the first quarter.

The class takes it from there, speculating reasons for this trend — and veering off topic four or five times in a span of 10 minutes.

The students clearly feel at ease with their teacher, interrupting the discussion to comment on a dab of paint on Huffman's right hand.

After about 30 minutes, the students are dismissed to their respective elementary schools, where they work with one teacher's classroom for the duration of the school year.

Corey and his sticker-covered truck aren't going anywhere, though. And despite Huffman's offer to give him a ride, Corey declines in the hopes that his father will come retrieve him from school.

A vehicle that won't start is one of the tamer personal issues that Huffman sees in her students. But during her third decade of teaching and technically retired, she is still exuberant and enthusiastic to be part of her students' support system.

When the class took a field trip to see a screening of the documentary "Waiting For 'Superman,'" about American public schools, Huffman offered to subsidize those who could not pay the full ticket price — a small and common act of generosity the students recognize.

"I think a lot of teachers at Lanphier feel it's more than just maybe what you thought teaching was going to be when you were in college," Huffman said. "It seems, over the years, teachers are more involved in trying to help their students, especially in high school, to do well in high school and be prepared for a career. That seems more and more to have become part of our job."

Determined despite difficulties

Nineteen-year-old Kayla Boggs walks a mile and a half to Lanphier every morning, gets a ride to Fairview Elementary School after Huffman's class meets and then walks from Fairview to her daily after-school job at California Kitchen on North Ninth Street.

If it's really late, her boss will give her a ride home after her shift ends. But usually, she walks from the restaurant to a friend's house west on North Grand Avenue, where she is staying for now.

Kayla is the oldest of several children, and the first in her family expected to graduate from high school. Her attendance is great, Huffman says, and Kayla thinks she has all A's and one C this semester — if she can fix the damage a couple quizzes in her government class did to her average.

The pressure of graduating from high school — an unknown accomplishment in her world — not having a permanent home and acting as a role model for her younger siblings makes her feel tense.

"I do get stressed out, but I don't show it," she said. "I have younger siblings and growing up with them ... you show them how you (deal with) with stress."

Kayla used to rely on counting to calm down. But added pressures forced her to think creatively.

"I try to count in a foreign language," she said, "because you have to remember how to say things and it gives you more of a challenge."

Counting in a language such as French was likely learned from Kayla's favorite teacher, Sue Childress at Grant Middle School.

In an essay she wrote for Huffman's class, Kayla said Childress "was so enthusiastic about her job that we got the feeling that we were entering a French culture when we walked into her room."

Likewise, Kayla said she hopes to make a similar atmosphere for her future classroom as she worked with Teresa Kaiser's fourth-grade students at Fairview.

"Want to try the challenge words?" Kayla asks a girl lying on the floor, kicking her purple and black boots together. The girl shakes her head and a new student is in her place within seconds.

The boy, Calvin, takes Kayla up on her offer. He isn't a perfect speller, but he correctly spells words such as "startle," "marvel" and "weary."

Kayla lets Calvin know she's impressed.

A few days later, down Sangamon Avenue at Wilcox Elementary School, Corey Todd is crowded around a tiny table with four second-grade boys from the class of Lynn Walwer, Corey's first-grade teacher.

Wearing a black, pinstriped sport coat, a chain bracelet and designer-style jeans, Corey is commanding authority over the on-the-brink-of-chaos young boys.

"I found 'motor!'" 7-year-old Nate House yells as the group works on a word search the afternoon before Veterans Day.

"I found 'America!'" Brayden Stroisch, 8, yells — and another, and another, all clicking their feet against their chairs.

Corey suggests looking for one letter and searching for words connected to that letter. Nate tries the method.

"I found 'Army!' I love the Army!" he chirps.

"I think they're adorable," Corey said. "They're always super energetic at a time of day that I would be ready for a nap."

Later, after the students are sent home, 55-year-old Lynn Walwer, who has been teaching since 1976, sits with Corey for a few minutes to help him with one of his assignments — and something he might face as an educator.

The academy's students have been assigned to discuss an abuse case with their teachers. Walwer speaks in generalities, careful not to reveal any names, but answers Corey's questions with candor.

"Every year, a teacher in the building (reports an abuse case)," she said, sitting at a students' desk. "That's the way it is ... it really happens and it's very, very sad."

'Pure joy for me'

Once the students graduate from high school, each has an opportunity to be recommended for Project Midstate Student Support — a program founded in 1990 at the UIS College of Education and Human Services.

Dr. Loretta Meeks, the founding director of Project MSS and a professor in UIS' teacher education department, said the program aims to teach local students in the hopes of producing local teachers.

Once accepted, students are eligible for scholarships that may pay for their entire tuition and often lead to a permanent teaching position in the Springfield or Decatur school districts.

The program partners with area community colleges, UIS and the Springfield and Decatur school districts, with a total of 50 students enrolled in the UIS program, drawing from each entity.

Providing classroom instruction and support for its students, the program turns into a family for its students.

Melissa Herrin knows this better than anybody.

The 2004 Lanphier graduate was Huffman's student before she entered Project MSS, and before her brother and boyfriend were killed. During her freshman year of college, Herrin woke to the news that the two men in her life had been found shot in her boyfriend's home.

"That was a hard period of my life," Herrin said. "MSS did help me out. They were there for me and checking on me to make sure I would not drop out and keep going."

Today, Herrin is a third-grade teacher at Harvard Park Elementary School in Springfield.

One motivation to keep going in particular was Meeks.

Meeks, like Huffman, keeps close tabs on her students. She performs the role of parent as much as she performs the role of teacher.

Sitting in her office on the third floor of the Brookens Library building Monday, Meeks pulls out a card that her students made for her after learning that her father-in-law had died. Nearly all of the comments included the word love, as if Meeks was a family member.

"They need what we call a family environment," Meeks said. "It's not just me. It's everyone else in the class ... if one person fails, it's not just one person failing — it's a group failing."

Meeks said her love of teaching was born the moment she recognized that her experience and skills could meet the needs of students, and she wouldn't consider another profession after that.

Huffman reflects on her career in similar prose.

"I taught for 34 years before I retired (in 2007) and I've always been so thankful that (teaching) is my profession and I knew it was the right thing to do," Huffman said. "And I thought, 'Gosh, if I could share some things I've learned and share with students who are interested in teaching,' then I thought I would like to do that in my retirement.

"To see them working with students is pure joy for me."

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