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Making A Difference With Masks



Photo Courtesy of Kelly Hicks

Angela McLaughlin • Feb 25, 2021

EDUCATION INSPIRATION! Kelly Hicks, Mountain Valley Academy

'It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge.' — Albert Einstein

It is not every day you meet a teacher as passionate about teaching and her students as Kelly Hicks of Mountain Valley Academy.

"I got excited about school in fourth grade and knew I was going to be a teacher," she says.

"I never veered off that path."

Hicks has been an educator since 1982, and part of Ramona Unified School District since 1991. She teaches fourth and fifth grades.

The past school year has posed unique challenges for educators, students and families. Instructors have had to adapt and adopt new strategies, and make an effort to take these hurdles in stride.

"Kelly is a bubbly taskmaster who expects much from her students and supports them and their family to achieve to the max," says Principal Kathryn Gunderson.

Gunderson says Hicks went above and beyond the call of duty, delivering books to quarantined families and going the extra mile with individualized Zoom sessions.

When the pandemic first hit, Hicks says her meetings with families went from approximately once every six weeks to once a week.

Because of restrictions on public gatherings, this year's Colonial Fair was canceled, but that did not stop her from making a memorable learning experience for her students. Instead of the fair, fifth-grade students dressed up as Colonial figures and presented one-minute memorized speeches in the first person.

Hicks says the students put a lot of effort into the project and had fun with it.

"They 'became' the person," she says. "I had one student who memorized over four minutes! It's exciting to see them go beyond and beyond the learning."

She also assigned students to make board game reports, where each student created a board game that incorporated elements of the plot and character development of specific books.

"Many families let me know that they were still playing the games at home!" she says.

Hicks says not a year goes by where she hasn't tried to change things up for her classes and create something that's not repetitive. In doing so, she hopes the kids will be more engaged. Already having that mindset in place made this year much more manageable.

"I like to do things in the class where the students aren't just observers — I like them to be participants," she says. "We do more active learning."

The idea is to make students more responsible for their education and, therefore, more committed.

Everyone has had to pivot and become more flexible this year, and Hicks feels this has made the students, teachers and parents a little better because of it. She attributes part of the success of the program to the collaboration between all parties.

While Mountain Valley Academy's hybrid schooling format may have provided an advantage to those adjusting to COVID times, the students still saw a number of changes to the structure of their schooling. Hicks says many projects that would have been group endeavors, such as in science, became more of a demonstration followed up by individual assignments.

"My part was to tweak the curriculum and put in more of a technology piece," she says. "At the beginning of the

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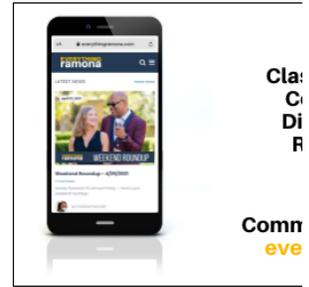
pandemic, I was remembering what it was like to be a first-year teacher, with all the technology that was thrown at us. But it gave me empathy for the students — to remember going into something without a foundation — and I think that was a good reminder for me.”

In spite of the differences this year, she says teachers tried to make things as fun and interesting as they could. She continues to be inspired by the effort students put into their work, and the appreciation, encouragement and acknowledgment from parents.

“I think that sometimes in education we become so regimented that we forget we are working with these moldable humans,” she says. “We have such a responsibility and opportunity to make an impact.”

It is hard not to be inspired by her enthusiasm and obvious love of the job.

“I feel very fortunate to get to come to work every day — just the ability to take teachable moments and use those,” she says. “Not every student is going to want to be a teacher, but I want them to be excited — and maybe that starts here.”



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