

DECEMBER 2020 TEACHERS of EXCELLENCE®

Recognizing Excellence in Teaching Through Dedication, Compassion & Knowledge

PROFILE



**NICHOLAS
FOUNDOS,**
Intervention
Teacher,
Glen Park
Academy, Gary

LAKE COUNTY

WHY TEACHING IS MORE THAN A DAY JOB:

Nicholas Foundos's first career was as a commodity trader at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. When his lack of a college degree kept him from getting a job at a big bank, he decided to go to Indiana University Northwest for a degree in education. It's a decision he's thankful for every day. "I love teaching because of the wonderful students that I've had the pleasure to guide through elementary school, which are the most important years in education. Being a male in education has been enlightening. The students' smiles and stories are the best. Most teachers will tell me, 'this was the worst year of class I ever had.' I've never experienced that. Of course, there have been situations where I've felt defeated but never the whole year." Foundos has been teaching for 23 years.

FAVORITE PART OF TEACHING:

Foundos recalls an event that occurred when he taught the after-school science club in partnership with the Museum of Science and Industry. "I invited some of the special needs students to join the class. One of the students couldn't wait for Thursdays. He would chase me down every day and ask me if it was Thursday yet. Because of this situation and my sharing this information with the museum, I was invited to speak at the Columbian Gala for the museum along with news media personality Bill Curtis. There were 900 people in attendance. It was a black-tie affair, and they wanted me to share this story with the major donors of the museum. It wasn't about me; it was about the life and behavior of this little boy that was so incredible. His schoolwork improved along with his behavior." He was struck by what one elderly woman in a mink stole stopped to say as she left. "She said, 'Sir, I'm a retired teacher. They should have had you speak all night. Your voice and your story kept everyone's attention.' I said thank you and continued with my journey in education."

PROFILE



**ERICKA
HIGHTOWER,**
Sixth Grade,
Merrillville
Intermediate
School,
Merrillville

WHY TEACHING IS MORE THAN A DAY JOB:

Ericka Hightower treasures the relationships she's established with her students and their families. "When children know that someone really cares about their academic success, students shine," she says. "I also focus on my students' emotional, physical and social needs, and they recognize the extra steps I take to show how much I care for them. I exhibit my belief in my students by focusing on a growth mindset, especially during this time of distance learning, which comes with its own set of challenges. Sometimes students are apprehensive about academics when they haven't been particularly successful, but I let the children know that it's imperative that they make mistakes as they can learn from them." Hightower is also proud of her role in facilitating the P.E.A.R.L.S. Charm Club, which stands for Pretty Elegant Articulate Young Ladies Society. The club prepares girls for school and leadership roles in life. She is a Purdue University graduate.

FAVORITE PART OF TEACHING:

After a career in the medical field, Hightower first taught fifth grade in the Gary School Corp. before moving to Merrillville Community Schools. "As my former students grow and mature, I have been humbled to be invited to many of their celebrations," Hightower says. "I have attended weddings, many sporting events, college graduations, baby showers and other joyful gatherings. These are memories that I will cherish for the rest of my life."

PROFILE



**KIM
TUMBAS,**
Second Grade,
Jackson Elementary
School, Valparaiso

PORTER COUNTY

WHY TEACHING IS MORE THAN A DAY JOB:

Kim Tumbas decided she wanted to teach when she was a second grade student and now enjoys teaching second grade. "I love watching the connections that are made in second grade," she says. "If I am able to provide a loving and safe classroom for every child that I teach, then I have conquered the most important job a teacher is given. I am always striving to be the teacher that I would want to be for my own children. What I love most about second grade and teaching is the ability to get children to love reading as much as I do." Tumbas is a graduate of Purdue University.

FAVORITE PART OF TEACHING:

"My favorite moment from my teaching career occurs every morning when my students walk into the classroom," Tumbas says. "Their energy and desire to learn is unparalleled and increases my personal passion to teach for the day. To pinpoint a favorite moment in teaching would be difficult because each day provides a new and exciting blessing in my life."

PROFILE



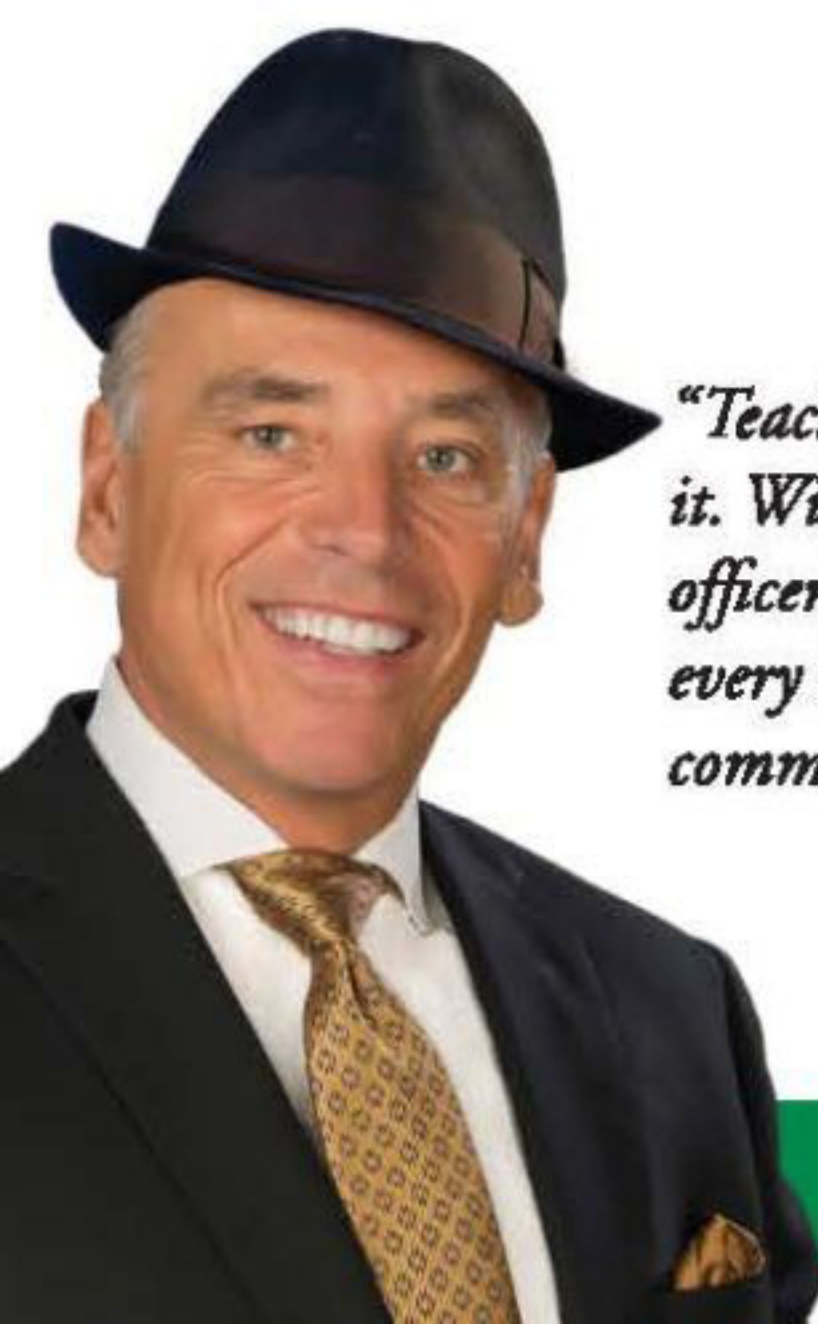
**SARAH
GLEASON,**
English, Chesterton
High School,
Chesterton

WHY TEACHING IS MORE THAN A DAY JOB:

"I love seeing the moment a student understands something or catches on to the deeper meaning or bigger connection," Sarah Gleason says. "That moment when they make a connection to something else we've done, to society, the outside world or even their personal lives, that's what brings me back every day. I also enjoy being able to read their written responses. It gives me perspective about who they are, where they are coming from and the point of view from which they see things. It's really helpful. It is so important to prepare our youth to be productive citizens out in society, so witnessing the moment they make that bigger connection makes me feel like they are moving further in that direction." Gleason did her student teaching at Merrillville High School before teaching at Valparaiso High School for two years and taking her current job at Chesterton High School. She received her bachelor's degree from Indiana University and her master's degree from Calumet College of St. Joseph.

FAVORITE PART OF TEACHING:

Leaving a legacy by truly affecting her students is what gives Gleason joy. "There have been times when a student has come back to see me asking for the little trick, saying or silly little way that I try to give them in order to understand a concept and remember it. That means something to me. That tells me that they are listening. However, the fondest memories are those that extend beyond the content that I teach: When a student reaches out for help or guidance because he or she truly trusts you, wants to share a story with you because they are so excited about something that is completely unrelated to the class or wants to teach you the latest dance move or trending phrase. Those are the moments where I feel like I'm connecting with them and helping them understand the power and comfort of community."



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PROFILE



KATE CLARK,
English,
Lake Central
High School,
St. John

LAKE COUNTY

WHY TEACHING IS MORE THAN A DAY JOB:

Kate Clark's career isn't the only thing that has flourished in her time at Lake Central; she befriended and began dating fellow Lake Central teacher, Josh Clark, in her first year of teaching. They ultimately married. And, just as her career and family have flourished at Lake Central, where Josh teaches government, Clark enjoys watching her students flourish, too. "I adore watching students grow and being able to help them through the difficult time that high school can be," she says. "I primarily teach writing and to see a student go from resisting the act of writing to realizing they can be successful with it – even good at it – is a powerful thing." Clark earned her bachelor's degree in English education from Purdue University and her master's degree in English literature from Purdue Northwest. She and Josh have three children.

FAVORITE PART OF TEACHING:

"More than anything, I love interacting with my students and learning about their lives," Clark says. "I work hard to balance what I know about their lives and struggles with my necessity to push them hard toward being as successful and analytical as possible. I want to see my students grow and develop while not compromising their mental health." She adds that her favorite teaching moments are seeing students with doubts develop confidence in themselves and their abilities.

PORTER COUNTY

WHY TEACHING IS MORE THAN A DAY JOB:

Nicole Knutson relishes finding novel ways to usher joy into her classroom and students' lives each day. "I try to bring joy to them by working with them on reading and trying to instill a lifelong joy of reading," she says. "Making reading fun, and, always being positive and encouraging is my goal every day. I try to bring a smile to every student's face each day. I encourage my students to do the same for others by being kind and positive." Knutson, a University of Indianapolis graduate, is also the school reading specialist. She lives in Chesterton with her husband, Kyle; son, Jacob; and family dog, Annie.

FAVORITE PART OF TEACHING:

Nothing is sweeter than a surprise from a kindergartner, and Knutson treasures each one including a humorous surprise she recently received from a well-intentioned student. She recalls that this student came in one morning and presented her with an object wrapped in newspaper. "He was so excited for me to open it. Upon opening it, I found a working cell phone. I was so caught off guard that I didn't have words at first. The student then said, 'Do you like it? Now we can talk all the time, even when I'm not at school!' His mother and I had a good laugh about it that day when I called to inform her about the phone."

PROFILE



NICOLE KNUTSON,
Kindergarten,
Liberty Elementary
School, Chesterton

PROFILE



LAURA NORMAN,
Science,
Wilbur Wright
Middle School
Munster

WHY TEACHING IS MORE THAN A DAY JOB:

"I love teaching because you have the opportunity to make a difference in the life of a child," says Laura Norman. "I love getting to know them personally. I enjoy interacting with my students, teaching them new concepts, seeing them succeed and showing improvement. Most of all, I like to have fun with my students. I love doing demonstrations and taking students to the lab. I truly want them to enjoy science and love learning." Norman earned her bachelor's degree from Franklin College, her master's degree from Indiana Wesleyan University, both near Indianapolis, and her administrative license from Purdue University. She has taught middle school science for 26 years and sponsors the school's Environmental Science Club.

FAVORITE PART OF TEACHING:

Each school year is spent building a small family or community, Norman says, with bonds established while overcoming unique obstacles and scoring triumphs. She recalls one student who particularly inspired her. This student was visually impaired, and she didn't want to participate in any lab activities because of it. "She never had the chance to participate because she was always pulled out of doing things that other kids did. I told her that she had to participate in lab activities in order to pass. She was not happy with me until she realized that she could do things. We started with small, simple tasks. It wasn't easy, but she did them well! Throughout the year, she gained so much confidence in herself and was able to do everything else that the other students did. It was beautiful to see the growth and change in her."

WHY TEACHING IS MORE THAN A DAY JOB:

Teaching offers the opportunity to incorporate creativity into daily lessons and activities, which suits Molly Vass ideally. In addition to teaching English, she's also the VHS Drama Club director; choreographs musical productions and teaches through the Limelight program at the Memorial Opera House; and teaches dance classes at Mirror Image Dance Academy. Vass explains: "I've always been a creative person, which is what drew me to teaching in the first place. As a student I loved having an opportunity to create interesting projects, write poetry, and think outside the box. I wanted to become a teacher so I could encourage my students to do the same. I love that each day in the classroom brings something new. Even if I teach the same story I've taught several times, my students will always bring a new interpretation or share a new perspective that I hadn't considered. I started teaching dance classes when I was a high school student, and I've loved teaching ever since."

FAVORITE PART OF TEACHING:

When Vass taught her favorite piece of literature, "The Great Gatsby," she created one of her favorite teaching memories. She organized a "speakeasy" surprise for her American literature students with some help from Memorial Opera House performers, who dressed up in 1920s-era garb and sang jazz songs while teaching her students how to dance the Charleston. Vass remembers: "It was a day when I got to bring all of my teaching worlds together – English, theater, and dance. It was definitely a day I won't forget, and I hope my students feel the same."

PROFILE



MOLLY VASS,
English,
Valparaiso
High School
Valparaiso

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