

Rebecka Peterson Finds the Good in Every School Day. She's the National Teacher of the Year



By [Madeline Will](#) — April 19, 2023 ⌚ 5 min read



Rebecka Peterson, a high school math teacher in Tulsa, Okla., is the 2023 National Teacher of the Year.
— Courtesy of Oklahoma State Department of Education

Rebecka Peterson, a high school math teacher in Tulsa, Okla., has been named the 2023 National Teacher of the Year.

Peterson, who has taught courses ranging from intermediate algebra to Advanced Placement Calculus AB for 11 years at Union High School, was named the national awardee Wednesday on CBS Mornings. Peterson was chosen both for her passion about making mathematics engaging,

relevant, and accessible to all students, and for her commitment to recognizing the good things happening in the classroom every day.

“I know I wasn’t selected because I’m the best teacher—there’s no such thing as the best teacher, there’s an infinite number of ways to be highly effective,” she told Education Week after the announcement. “But I am so grateful to be able to share my story, and I hope that I can act as a mirror this year. I hope that teachers all over resonate with a piece of me, my story, and a piece of my classroom.

“Ultimately, what science has taught us is that a mirror reflects light, and there’s just light all over this country through our teachers in their classrooms. I hope that I can reflect their light and spread their messages of hope and love and tenacity even further.”

Peterson, an immigrant of Swedish-Iranian descent, initially taught at the college level for a few years before switching to high school. The first year in a K-12 classroom was overwhelming and a “shock to [her] system,” she said. She came across a collaborative blog called, “[One Good Thing](#),” where teachers would document the successes and joys in their classrooms—living by the mantra that every day might not be good, but there’s one good thing in every day.

Peterson has contributed to that blog for a decade, writing 1,400 posts.

“I credit that intentional gratitude to saving my career,” she said. “I’m naturally a glass-half-empty type of gal, so this really did rewire my brain into seeing the beautiful, small, everyday moments that were happening in the classroom. It helped me tuck those away, and then they sustained me.”

During her tenure as the Oklahoma Teacher of the Year, Peterson traveled across the state to document the good work teachers in all contexts are doing, despite the challenges. As the national honoree, she hopes to continue to spread a message of gratitude.

“The first two words I learned in English were, ‘thank you,’” she said. “That has and always will be my message to teachers.”

Strong connections in the classroom

CBS Mornings reported that 11 of Peterson’s former students are now math teachers themselves. Several of them said on the morning show that Peterson was an encouraging

teacher who formed strong relationships with her students and championed them to do their best.

“I just remember thinking about the way that she made me and the rest of her students feel, and it’s a feeling like no other,” said Alyssa Fisher, who now teaches in Peterson’s old classroom. “She was just willing to let her students into her life. She brought in so much vulnerability and just boldness into the classroom.”

Fisher remembers when Peterson told her that she was pregnant during her senior year of high school. Now, a few years later, Peterson’s son will be a ringbearer in Fisher’s upcoming wedding.

“It’s been such a beautiful thing that really came from that simple connection she made in the classroom,” Fisher said.

Kayden Kehe said that Peterson “recognized a love for teaching that I had but that I didn’t recognize.” Peterson gave him advice and encouragement as he pursued teaching as a career, which “changed my life,” Kehe said. “It has made more of a difference than I think she could ever know.” Peterson said her goal has always been to incorporate joy into her classroom, and that while there is space for both good and bad days, grief and triumph, “joy insists on the good, the true, and the light having the final word.”

“As much as I want my students learn about derivatives and integrals, what I really want them to take away is that they’re the authors of their own story, and I hope that they’re inspired to make sure that the light always has the final word in their chapters,” she said.

To that end, Peterson has her students write their own “one good thing” every Friday. Many of her students have continued this practice on their own after graduation—or incorporated it into their own classrooms.

“Teaching is this continual ripple effect, and you never know whose trajectory you’ll change, and then whose trajectory they’ll change,” she said.

Peterson will be honored at the White House

CBS Mornings also played a congratulatory message from first lady Jill Biden for Peterson. In it, Biden, who teaches at a community college, announced that Peterson and the other state teachers of the year will be honored in a ceremony at the White House April 24 an annual tradition.

“As both an educator and a dedicated journaler myself, I loved that you shared the beautiful and positive experiences occurring in your classroom to inspire others and capture what it means to be a teacher,” Biden said. “Thank you for showing the nation the power, purpose, and the joy of our profession.”

Peterson was selected by a national committee from a pool of 55 state teachers of the year who hail from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, the Department of Defense Education Activity, and U.S. territories.

The committee includes representatives from 17 education groups and is organized by the Council of Chief State School Officers, which facilitates the award.

This year, for the first time in at least the past three decades, five teachers—instead of four—were named finalists for the award. The other four finalists were: Harlee Harvey, a 1st grade teacher in Point Hope, Alaska; Carolyn Kielma, a high school science teacher in Bristol, Conn.; Jermar Rountree, a preschool-8th grade physical education and health teacher in the District of Columbia; and Kimberly Radostits; an 8th-12th grade Spanish teacher in Oregon, Ill.

Kurt Russell, a history teacher from Ohio, won the national award in 2022.

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Madeline Will is a reporter for Education Week who covers the teaching profession.

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