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Media Release

Pulse of CCSD – Phillip Caston cataloging high school memories year after year at Wando

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Charleston, SC – When Phillip Caston’s ninth-grade English teacher passed out applications to join the school newspaper, the foundation of his career path was laid. It changed his life forever.

As a student at Spartanburg High School, Caston envisioned himself going to Clemson and studying architecture. Joining the high school newspaper, the Norse News, changed all of that. Under Lisa McCulley’s instruction, Caston fell in love with the school newspaper. He quickly moved up the ranks and was named sports editor his first year, and later went on to become editor in chief his senior year. He was also named South Carolina Scholastic Journalist of the Year in 1997 by the SC Scholastic Press Association (SCSPA).

Caston initially went to Clemson to study architecture, but it was not for him. He changed his major to English and earned a position at the college newspaper, The Tiger. By his junior year, he was Editor in Chief.

“It was quite an experience,” said Caston. “We pursued controversial, in-depth stories. I began to realize that I genuinely wanted to be a journalist, but teaching it was never on my radar.”

Looking back, the Wando High School English teacher finds that ironic considering three of his grandparents and several cousins are all teachers.

Before his teaching career started, Caston had an intense run as a reporter. While attending graduate school at the University of Maryland, Caston worked for a wire service. He covered the Maryland 2002 gubernatorial race in Washington and the D.C. sniper shootings.

"The excitement was there, but I covered some very disturbing things," said Caston. "I was also not cut out for D.C. life, so I set my sights on moving back down to South Carolina."

Caston took a position with the Post and Courier as a nighttime crime reporter. After over two years of covering homicides, car accidents, and listening to a scanner all night, it began to wear on him.

"I had covered one murder too many," said Caston.

While still on the job, he was invited to be a guest speaker in his cousin's classroom in Spartanburg. By the time he arrived, the principal had changed it to a presentation for the entire eighth grade.

"I sat in on some of my cousin's classes and saw the excitement in the eyes of several students as I spoke about my profession, and that is when I felt a calling to teach," said Caston.

Caston went through the Program of Alternative Certification for Educators (PACE) to receive his teaching certificate in 2006. He attended a job fair with Charleston County School District. At Wando, the line was out the door. Caston turned around and left. Years later, upon hearing that story, then Principal Lucy Beckham laughed said he should have gotten in that line.

A regional application landed Caston a job at J.L. Mann High School as an English teacher and the swim coach.

"I had never coached or taught," said Caston. "The interview with Principal Susan Hughes went great, and during that, she mentioned the need for an adviser of the school newspaper. Of course, I agreed. That first night with my students, as we were designing pages, I thought to myself, 'I never imagined being back in this role again'."

Two years later, during a department meeting, Caston learned the yearbook adviser was leaving. He agreed to step into the role, thinking it might be wise to pool his resources. He already knew the students on the yearbook staff because he was their English teacher.

In 2008, he became the advisor to the Talismann yearbook staff. Caston, along with his students, embarked on a learning journey.

"The secret to it is the kids," said Caston. "With their enthusiasm and my newspaper knowledge, we turned the yearbook into something new and fresh."

Caston handed over the swim coach reigns to a colleague to focus 100 percent on teaching.

"Teaching student media is a different way of teaching," said Caston. "I gained a lot of respect for my former teachers through the process."

There were some jitters among the newspaper students when they traveled to their first South Carolina Student Press Association (SCSPA) awards conference. Caston was nervous for the students and wanted them to win. Those feelings indicated to Caston just how special his new role and opportunity were.

Caston advised the newspaper staff for seven years at J.L. Mann and the yearbook staff for five years. A new opportunity presented itself in 2013 that would bring him back to Charleston.

Caston ran into his friendly rival Tammy Watkins from Wando High School years later at the annual SCSPA banquet. She was the advisor to the nationally-recognized student newspaper, The Tribal Tribune. She shared that the current yearbook advisor was stepping down to take another position.

"She pestered me and went on and on about how wonderful Wando was," said Caston. "I eventually interviewed with Lucy, and 30 minutes into the interview with her, I knew that if I got the job, I was about to embark on something extraordinary."

Caston began the school year at Wando that year but not before his newspaper team beat Watkins' team for the top award at SCSPA.

Eight years later, Caston has no regrets. He teaches all levels of English, Intro to Journalism, and is the yearbook advisor.

"At the first faculty meeting we had, led by Lucy, I could tell she had a planned speech," said Caston. "She got off script a bit and started crying about a former student who she had run into at a store that expressed his appreciation of all she had done for him. She wasn't scared to show her emotion in front of a bunch of new staff. She truly cared about each student. Although she is gone, it is hard not to feel her presence all over this school."

Beckham instilled a culture at Wando where that staff and students are always striving to be the best. According to Caston, his students have that drive and are purposeful in their intensity to be the best.

"It is amazing to watch the drive, passion, and ownership shown by the students to excel," said Caston. "Wando is a great family environment, despite its size. Being on the yearbook staff allows us to be even more connected as a family of sorts."

Caston finds great joy in being a teacher of core subjects as well. He especially appreciates when students relate to his lessons – even more so when it "clicks" with a student.

"Some are not so interested, but you still have to keep them engaged enough to learn something," said Caston. "A good book of literature can do that. When it does click, it's a really special moment for me."

Caston enjoys the leadership of current principal Sherry Epplesheimer, his mentor in his early years at Wando.

"She is supportive of my program and is congratulatory when we have [successes](#)," said Caston. "We appreciate her support because it gives the kids and the [program](#) that extra boost."

Caston describes student journalism as an education that has every 21st-century skill wrapped up in one perfect bundle.

"You would be hard-pressed to find that in other classes," said Caston. "Journalism is an opportunity to teach in a simulated work environment and demonstrate directly how one works their way up the ladder in a more than real collaborative, team environment. It would be hard to find any other curriculum as valuable as student journalism. Journalism can change your life. I don't say that lightly. It truly can alter your course."

[A 2008 study](#) by the American Press Institute showed that graduating high school journalism students performed better in their freshman year in college than their counterparts. Caston has had journalism students who were shy or timid or new to town with no friends graduate full of life, confidence, and a bit of sass.

His former colleague agrees.

"The first time I met Phillip Caston, he was a 17-year-old student journalist who was serving on the South Carolina Scholastic Press Association executive board as a student officer," Watkins said in an award nomination she recently wrote. "He was young, enthusiastic, devoted to student journalism, motivated to make a difference. Over 20 years later, little has changed."

Thanks to Watkins and Epplesheimer's nomination, Caston was recently named one of three Distinguished Yearbook Advisers in the nation for the H.L. Hall National Yearbook Adviser of the Year award. The H.L. Hall National Yearbook Adviser of the Year program is designed to honor outstanding advisers and their exemplary work from the previous year and throughout their careers.

"I learned over time, and I hope others will, that a yearbook is more than a book full of pictures," said Caston. "It is a recording of history, and it serves an important function. It is an important document to the school's history that is often undervalued."

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About the Charleston County School District

Charleston County School District (CCSD) is a nationally-accredited school district that is committed to providing equitable and quality educational opportunities for all of its students. CCSD is the second-largest school system in South Carolina and represents a unique blend of urban, suburban, and rural schools spanning 1,300 square miles along the coast. CCSD serves more than 50,000 students in 87 schools and specialized programs.

CCSD offers a diverse, expanding portfolio of options and specialized programs, delivered through neighborhood, magnet, IB (international baccalaureate), Montessori, and charter schools. Options include programs in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM); music and other creative and performing arts; career and technical preparation programs; and military.