

# At Greater Lowell Technical High School, Thanksgiving lesson taught by students



Teacher Cassie Thyne, of Lowell, started her year at the Immaculate Conception Church, where her 24-year-old niece, police officer Katie Thyne, was honored after giving her life in the line of duty in January. In a year that only continued to be tough, Fenlon was recently moved by by students' especially thoughtful responses to a regular yearly assignment to write what they are thankful for. Sun file photo/Robert Mills

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TYNGSBORO — Cassie Fenlon started 2020 with the crushing news that her 24-year-old niece, Katie Thyne, was killed in the line of duty while working as a police officer in Virginia. Then the COVID-19 pandemic struck, scrambling life even more for the nursing and health teacher.

Fenlon, of Lowell, wasn't optimistic about how things would go when she assigned students in her Health and Wellness classes at Greater Lowell Technical High School to write about what they were thankful about in this trying year.

It's an assignment she gives every year, but most years aren't quite like 2020, and both school officials and medical professionals have noted the effects remote learning has had on students' mental and emotional health.

"I was worried about the responses that I'd get this year," she said. "I was feeling down the day that I assigned it. I was kind of having a pity day for myself."

But then Fenlon started reading the responses from students, ranging from freshmen to seniors, in six different classes.

She ended up with tears in her eyes, even amid bouts of laughter.

From responses that were funny, such as a freshman saying, “I am thankful for my family because they mean everything to me even though I annoy them because it’s fun,” to responses so thoughtful and strong Fenlon herself learned from them.

“I am thankful that I had people to support me when I was struggling. I am thankful that I am able to have an education at this school,” one freshman wrote.

“Quarantine was hard for everyone. A lot of people died & It affected lots of people’s homes & mental states. Teenagers went through a lot with depression, anxiety, & break ups so I’m just thankful to be alive & safe,” wrote another.

The following day, Fenlon opened up and told her classes about her niece, Katie Thyne.

Thyne was the mother of a 2-year-old girl when she gave her life trying to arrest a drug suspect as part of her work as a police officer in Newport News, Va., where she was known for her work in the community, work with youths, and caring personality.

“My eyes welled up and I explained to them how my niece...” Fenlon said. “I was like, prior to this pandemic, this is how my year started.”

And then Fenlon told her students what their thoughtfulness had done.

“I was feeling bad, and I was feeling sad, and reading all your posts... you have no idea what that did for me personally. It just put things into perspective for me,” Fenlon said she told her students. “You guys made me smile, you made me cry, you made me laugh, and it just made me thankful for the things that are in my life instead of looking at what I don’t have I guess.”

Many of the students had noted personal struggles themselves.

“This year has been pretty tough. With everything going on it’s hard to see the good in life, especially with COVID still around,” a senior wrote. “I am thankful for all those who have helped me and all those who have been patient during this time of year. I am thankful for everything I have and everyone in my life.”

Some also shared details of how they’ve coped with quarantine and stress.

“Promise this is actually the last one but in this whole quarantine I found myself, I found the things I enjoyed, and what I hated, and found things I didn’t know about myself. I grew as a person,” a freshman wrote.

“I am thankful for books,” another freshman wrote. “I love books, and it has been especially easy to slip into another world during this pandemic with all the free time I have.”

Fenlon said people, including herself, sometimes don’t expect teenagers to be so thoughtful and provoking. But she said that this year students, especially in classes like health and wellness, seem to express even more since they’re often writing down assignments at home and not standing in front of a class of peers.

“When they just write to me, they tend to open up,” she said.

“I am thankful for my parents,” a freshman wrote. “My mom is a nurse, and has to work with people that have COVID, and my dad is a police officer that went to all the rallies that were all about defunding the police.”

Discussing the fear of knowing their dad was working at a riot, like ones where other police had been injured, and expressing worry about being mocked for voicing pride for their dad in public, the student nonetheless remained positive.

“I am thankful for the world we live in, and everything that comes to me,” that freshman wrote.

Fenlon said that even after teaching nursing and health for seven years, the sheer number of thoughtful responses surprised and moved her.

“Sometimes we lose sight of what’s important, and they brought me back to that,” Fenlon said. “I told them, ‘you made me thankful for all of you.’”

“This year has been really difficult, but we are all doing good and I know we will get through this,” a senior wrote. “I’m thankful that through these hard times I have my family and friends to be there for me and support me. I’m extremely thankful that I am healthy.”