

National Teachers of the Year Kurt Russell (2022), Ashlie Crosson (2025), Rebecka Peterson (2023), Missy Testerman (2024) and Stephanie Yoon of Google for Education with Elmo, Oscar the Grouch, Abby Cadabby and Cookie Monster (Photo credit: Brett Sims)

Union's Rebecka Peterson visits *Sesame Street* for Teacher Appreciation Week

(April 28, 2025)

In celebration of Teacher Appreciation Week (May 5 – 9, 2025), Union's Rebecka Peterson, 2023 National Teacher of the Year, was invited to participate in a once-in-a-lifetime social media campaign. Along with 2025 National Teacher of the Year Ashlie Crosson and previous honorees, Peterson was whisked off to New York by Google for Education to pay tribute to teachers by filming some special video segments with *Sesame Street* characters.



Rebecka Peterson with Elmo

In advance of the social media blitz, Chief Communications Officer Chris Payne sat down with Rebecka Peterson to talk about her trip to the very real place that is *Sesame Street*.

Chris Payne, Chief Communications Officer, Union Public Schools: Good morning! What a pleasure to get the chance to catch up with you.

Rebecka Peterson: Good morning!

CP: With Teacher Appreciation Week coming up, you were approached several weeks ago with a unique opportunity. What happened?

RP: Google for Education approached the last four National Teachers of the Year to see if we would be willing to make short little video clips with *Sesame Street* characters in New York as thank-yous for teachers all over the country. And of course, we said yes.

CP: So, what was your first reaction when they mentioned *Sesame Street*?

RP: My mentor, Sarah Brown Wessling, runs the National Teacher of the Year program . . . she's the one who called to ask me about it. It was like déjà vu, as she is the one who called me two years ago to say I'd been selected for National Teacher of the Year. And I was just so giddy because, as an immigrant to the United States, *Sesame Street* – in addition to my teachers – helped me learn to read. So, it was exciting and surreal to get to be behind the scenes. It was a real joy and a treat that one of my core childhood memories is also now a core adulthood memory.

CP: How old were you when you arrived in the U.S.?

RP: I didn't speak any English when I first arrived here, so Pre-K would have been one of my first introductions to learning a second language.

CP: *Sesame Street* was probably an immediate connection when you moved here?

RP: Absolutely. I really did grow up on *Sesame Street*, *Mr. Rogers'[Neighborhood]*, *Barney* and *Wishbone*.

CP: What better way to learn a second language?

RP: I know, although I will have to say that The Count was always my favorite.

CP: Which makes sense with you being a math teacher. This does seem like the realization of a childhood dream.

RP: One hundred percent. It's still surreal . . .

When I'm talking to Grover, obviously you see me and Grover, and there's this puppeteer lying on the ground. And he says, "You're using my wrong hand," so he's contorting his whole body [to remain out of the frame]. He was on the ground, doing very hard work, but you



Math teacher Rebecka meets The Count!



Rebecka and costar Grover

don’t see any of that in the video. And I had to laugh to myself because it felt like a microcosm of teaching. Sometimes people peek into classrooms, and it looks so effortless, but the truth is that the teacher has done a lot of behind-the-scenes work in both planning and prepping that can make that final product look effortless, when in reality it was anything but that.

CP: It does seem symbolic of your own work. Was your part scripted?

RP: Yes, it was all scripted, which is hard, right? Because that's not exactly how classroom work happens. I think the hardest part for me was when they would change the script as we were shooting. You’re not sure what the final product is going to look like until later.

It takes a whole team of people to produce. It was so fun, and it was stressful too, making these changes on the spot. The whole time I was thinking, “Do not mess up in front of Grover. Do not mess up in front of Grover.”

CP: What was it like visiting the studio of Sesame Workshop?

RP: It was so meaningful to be there with some of the other National Teachers of the Year and get to experience it with them. I don't think [sponsor] Google realized the gift they were giving us. There are very few people who have been through the exhausting and exhilarating year that is National Teacher of the Year. So, to get all five of us back together in the same space – Sarah Brown Wessling (2010), Kurt Russell (2022), Missy Testerman (2024) and Ashlie Crosson (2025) – is a gift in and of itself. I don't take that gift lightly at all.

To be around people who you've borrowed courage and strength from, and to see them again, talk to them in person and give a real hug instead of a text.



National Teachers of the Year Kurt Russell (2022), Missy Testerman (2024), Rebecka Peterson (2023) and Ashlie Crosson (2025), departing Sesame Street after a fun day.

CP: Visiting *Sesame Street* . . . what was that like?



Sesame Street is a REAL place!

RP: It was a truly magical experience. I just wanted to take a picture of everything. When you arrive, there really is a green and white street sign at the intersection of Broadway and Sesame Street. And here you are, this little Oklahoma girl, and there really is a Sesame Street. I don't think I'll ever forget getting to see Elmo laugh in real life or watching Cookie Monster destroy a cardboard cookie or (my favorite) hugging Grover. I'll cherish this experience for years to come.

From the moment you walk in, everything is so well thought out. It's clear that everybody's proud of their work, that they've paid such attention to detail. Even in the bathroom, there are vinyl *Sesame* characters in the mirrors that are sort of talking to you. They are so proud of their work, nurturing our next generation, and it's work they really should be proud of. There's really nothing else like it. They are just like teachers, right?

CP: What surprised you most when you visited the set?

RP: The intensity is what surprised me, because when we watch the show as viewers, it just looks so fun and cute and effortless. And there's nothing, absolutely *nothing* effortless about it. I've had some intense interviews in my life, but this was one where I did not want to mess this up. It was the intensity for me.

CP: Which characters did you interact with?

RP: My video was with Grover. Kurt, my [Teacher of the Year] predecessor, is featured with Elmo. Ashley Crosson, 2025 National Teacher of the Year, was paired with Cookie Monster, and Missy Testerman, my successor, did a salute with several characters including Oscar the Grouch and Abby.

CP: When I saw Oscar, I had a moment of sympathy for whoever got stuck with him.

RP: Even in the photos, he still comes off curmudgeonly. I think it's the eyebrows.

CP: Anything that defied your expectations?

RP: It should not have surprised me . . . but the level of perfectionism. Grover's puppeteer would practice the intonation and try different things. Then he would ask if he could ad lib here or there, so it comes off like Grover: goofy, silly, a little off the cuff. Literally every syllable was intentional. And if that is not masterful teaching, I don't know what it is.

CP: How many people were on the set when you're shooting?

RP: The puppeteer, the teacher, two people working cameras, sound, lighting, wardrobe and makeup, and a couple of people watching. Probably a dozen. Twelve people, being "alone" together.

CP: What was that like, meeting characters from your childhood? I loved your picture with The Count.



Rebecka shooting her scene with Grover on the classroom set (Photo credit: Brett Sims)

RP: That wasn't actually The Count, but a big wallpaper graphic, so I had to take a picture. But I have had the chance to meet Elmo, Grover, Cookie Monster and Oscar the Grouch. These are incredibly talented and dedicated puppeteers who make them come to life, which is also sort of surreal. Seeing them hanging lifeless on their hangers was hilarious. Like I saw Elmo at one point with an eye mask, basically getting the spa treatment. And then meeting the puppeteers who bring these puppets we know and love to life. It's extraordinary.

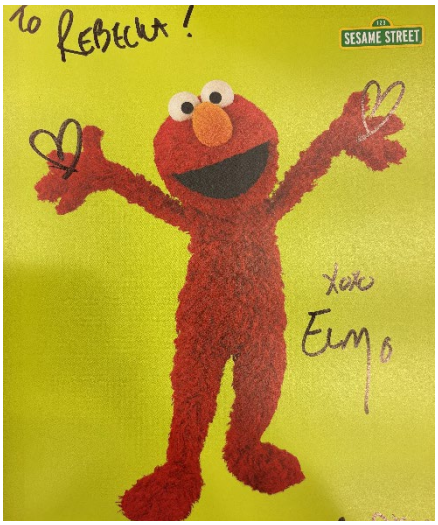
CP: That must be hard work.

RP: I think it's hard work physically and mentally – it's really taxing. In working with Grover's puppeteer, I would mess up my lines and I'd say, "Grover, I'm sorry," and he would stay in character and say, "It's fine, Miss Rebecka." He was comforting even off-camera.

CP: Did you witness other interactions between puppets and other Teachers of the Year?
RP: My favorite was watching Kurt Russell with Elmo. Kurt was 2022 National Teacher of the Year, and you could not have done a better pairing. They were dressed in matching outfits – white shirt, dark suit and blue tie. Kurt is another one of my mentors, because he takes his work very seriously. In his interactions with Elmo, it's like a glimpse into Mr. Russell's classroom, with him demonstrating genuine care and love, intentionality, precision and thoughtfulness. They even had little matching coffee cups with an E for Elmo and K for Kurt. And the whole video is about how Elmo wants to be like his teacher, Mr. Kurt.

CP: What will we see during the rollout of this campaign during Teacher Appreciation Week?

RP: Beginning Monday, May 5, 2025 – from Monday through Thursday of Teacher Appreciation Week – they will release a brief video every day. Each is about a minute-and-a-half and will feature a *Sesame Street* character with one of the National Teachers of the Year. Each one has a different theme. You'll have to watch to see! They will appear in the social media feeds and web pages of Google's home page, as well as *Sesame*'s and Google's social media. Ashlie, the 2025 National Teacher of the Year, will have a blog living on Google's home page, and these videos will accompany that as well.



An autograph from Elmo

CP: From the pictures, it looks like you left with some special gifts.

RP: Yes, they gave all of us a *Sesame Street* tote and in the tote, there was a character for each of us. I got a little stuffed "Super Grover" because he's wearing his cape and helmet. Very cute and lots of great pictures!

CP: What was your son's response when he heard you were going to be on *Sesame Street*?

RP: Jonas is the typical 9-year-old: "This is super-cool and super-cringy, mom." Because he's too cool for *Sesame Street* right now, way too cool.

CP: Tell us about how your life has changed since you've returned to Union.

RP: I am now the district's teacher leadership specialist. I am house at Union High School, and I get to pilot most of my work there. I truly feel I have a job that intersects my classroom experience with my Teacher of the Year work. Truth be told, in many ways I model my work after experiences like this one with *Sesame Street* — experiences that honor educators. When we feel elevated and celebrated as teachers, it renews our commitment to elevating and celebrating our colleagues in our own schools.

Part of my job is working with new teachers and making sure they have what they need . . . be that instructional coaching if they want it, taking data on classroom engagement, going to see other teachers, providing lunch-and-learns, and just being another sounding board or thought partner. I also work with the community to bring partners to the table who want to invest in teachers.

Additionally, there's a recruiting aspect to the role where I visit colleges and their soon-to-be graduates. Just last week I was in Tahlequah at NSU. I always say Union is the place that grew me as a teacher, and we'd love the chance to invest in them, too!

But what is really lighting up my heart and my brain the most right now is, I'm recruiting for and creating a "future teachers" course here at the high school. So, I'm working closely with Union's College & Career Center to offer this course next year in conjunction with NSU. It's geared towards students who are curious about exploring the teaching profession. It's called Introduction to Educator Leadership, so it's a leadership elective, but they will get class time with me as well as a residency experience within the Union district. And then, you know, hopefully they say yes and pursue a teaching career and come back home to Union to teach with us!



Rebecka Peterson arriving at Rebecka Peterson arriving at Sesame Workshop, the site of the Sesame Street studio Workshop, the site of the Sesame Street studio

CP: Do you have any parting wisdom for us?

RP: I hope people are reminded of their favorite teacher when they watch these [Sesame Street] reels. I hope they remember those moments where they felt really seen and heard by their teacher, and the moments that were goofy, the moments that were impactful. I hope we all watch and remember that those favorite moments with teachers were not accidents but came to fruition because someone rolled up their sleeves and did the hard and beautiful work of creating a classroom culture.

What also struck me when I was in New York was all the work that goes into creating one video. You see the actors and the Sesame Street characters. You know the puppeteers must be somewhere. But there are also people working on the script, adjusting lighting, getting the sound just right, focusing on camera angles. There are people operating the teleprompters, working on wardrobe and makeup and it reminded me so much of the behind-the-scenes work in public schools.

Yes, we teach kids, and we make sure they have access to food and transportation. We ensure there are programs in place for just about any passion a student has. We offer wraparound services like counseling and medical clinics. Just like it takes every person to create a Sesame Street episode, it takes all our people from the bus stop to the boardroom to make sure the final piece of launching a prepared student into the community comes to fruition.