

LOCAL NEWS

Upper Darby bio teacher among those receiving the Excellence in Teaching Award



Emily Stewart, a biology/anatomy teacher at Upper Darby High School is recognized for the All-Delco Hi-Q/Excellence in Teaching in 2024. (PETE BANNAN-DAILY TIMES)



By **COLIN AINSWORTH**

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UPPER DARBY — While only separated by a half-mile stretch of Lansdowne Avenue, the path of one county teacher from a student desk at Archbishop Prendergast to the front of the class at Upper Darby High School eschewed the straight shot for a circuitous route of soul-searching and serendipity.

Initially trading the dance stage for the classroom, biology and anatomy teacher Emily Stewart became an “adolescent expert” as she struck a balance of science educator, dance studio instructor and high school theater choreographer.

Stewart is one of 19 regional educators to be honored with the 2024 Excellence in Teaching Award Thursday night at the annual FMFCU Foundation Celebration at the Drexelbrook, alongside the 2024 All-Delco Hi-Q Team and other honorees in the education field.

While teachers from the service area of the Franklin Mint Federation Credit Union will be feted with a gala event, Stewart initially learned of the honor in a way echoing many past recipients: with fear over a call from her principal.

“(Matthew Alloway) called and I missed his call. Whenever the principal calls you, you think ‘oh no,’ ” said Stewart.

The Friday night voicemail left her with a weekend to process the honor.

After speaking in person Monday morning, Stewart discovered Alloway had let the faculty know of the FMFCU Foundation putting the stamp of approval on her nomination.

“The rest of that day, 200 faculty members were saying ‘oh, congratulations!’ It’s amazing when I really do reflect on the award ... it’s my normal routine of doing my job that I take much pride in, but I don’t ever think I need to be awarded. There’s many excellent teachers in this building. But just to know that somebody appreciates what you’re doing for their students is very, very special to me,” she said.

Stewart’s normal routine covers all tracks of students for biology and anatomy.

While student motivation is usually higher in anatomy, one of a multitude of third- and fourth-year science electives offered at UDHS, the state-mandated biology course may need a hook to draw students in.

Noting the wide swath of ethnic backgrounds at the high school, Stewart often opens the biology semester with a TED Talk video on the science of melanin.

“By the time they get to 10th grade and bio, they’ve heard of melanin, but they might not know ... the evolution advantage to it and the history of it,” she said. “So it’s a lot of times that’s the hook; (students say) ‘oh that’s kind of interesting, let me pay attention to her.’ ”



Emily Stewart says, “It’s my normal routine of doing my job that I take much pride in, but I don’t ever think I need to be awarded. There’s many excellent teachers in this building. But just to know that somebody appreciates what you’re doing for their students is very, very special to me.” (PETE BANNAN-DAILY TIMES)

Students’ attention is often further piqued when arriving at genetics, prompting many to arrive at an “a-ha” moment, according to Stewart.

“We cover the basics in terms of normal chromosomes, abnormal chromosomes, and when you’re born with a disorder what are the implications of that. But sometimes, because students have real connections to that, it leads to conversations,” she said. “That’s where the students feel like they’re comfortable enough to start to ask questions and start to engage a little bit.”

Students’ questions have kept Stewart on her own path of continual reading and renewal of her scientific interests.

Several years into her teaching career, thoughts of possibly going back to school for nursing or another medical field were subdued when an anatomy position opened.

“Once I started teaching anatomy, the questions the students had were real. They wanted to know things,” she said. “I saw these kids really do need someone who wants to teach and let them ask questions without judgement, be honest and have scientific conversations.”

Athletic injuries, heart attacks, digestive disorders, and exercise methods were among the myriad topics Stewart cited that arise in her classes, noting the instantaneous world of social media and video platforms cause many hands to be raised.

“I joke with them all the time: ‘Guys, if I didn’t know something I had to go to a library and look it up, then go home and write the paper,’ ” she said, looking for students to keep up their curiosity while balancing it with sound research methods to vet the evolving sports science, nutrition and other biology-based trends that populate the online world.

As with her students today, anatomy piqued Stewart’s scientific curiosity as a senior at Archbishop Prendergast High School.

The interest coincided with mapping out plans for life after high school.

“I wanted to make my life very much look like my parents’ life. I wanted to be married with a family, and then I had to think about how do I get to that point,” she said. “I love dance. I love discovering things about the human body. I’m a pretty personable person. I find joy in working with others, so when I looked at those things individually, it was like all things point to teaching,” she said.

Her background

Prior to her experience with Biology II at Prendie, dance was the primary focus for the Collingdale native.

Early in her elementary school life at St. Joseph’s School, she began attending classes at Cathie Collins’ School of Dance in Aldan. “I just loved it so much, and I thought I’m going to make that my life,” she said, continuing with Collins’ studio through high school graduation.

Stewart continued with dance through her time at Gwynedd Mercy College, arriving freshman year to find a fledgling dance team which she immediately helped helm, rising to head captain her senior year. As her dance team leadership presaged her classroom and choreography work, an advanced bio-chem class provided a blueprint for her teaching style.

“The book was this thin small book, I’m like ‘huh, this is gonna be easy,’ ” she said.

Stewart discovered the thin text was filled with case studies to be discussed the first day of each week, followed by an investigation period.

“The last day of that cycle we’d come back with the answers and prognosis,” she said. “That was one of those times you’d have to start bouncing ideas off each other and collaborate with your classmates, and I loved that environment. I said ‘I want that in my classroom. I want this productive discussion and collaboration over science topics to be happening for the rest of my life.’ ”

The ‘serendipity’ part

After completing her Bachelor of Science in biology and secondary education in May 2005, a series of events unfolded repeatedly eliciting “serendipity” in her description.

Working as a substitute teacher in several different schools that September, Upper Darby High School soon came through with a building sub offer.

While Stewart covered various classes, an assistance principal was going on maternity leave and a biology teacher was slotted to cover her position.

“They asked me to be a long-term sub for that teacher. (The principal job) ended up becoming a permanent position for her, so I became a permanent biology teacher the following year,” she said.

As her teaching career ramped up, Stewart completed a Master of Education in educational leadership with a concentration in special education at Neumann University.

Meanwhile, a return to Collins’ studio after graduating from college would prove well-timed to help her childhood mentor.

Collins had long helmed Monsignor Bonner and Archbishop Prendergast’s theater choreography and was recently faced with a cancer diagnosis.

“She wanted to take something off her plate to focus on her health and on the studio. She asked me to fill in (on choreography),” said Stewart. “Then she basically said, ‘it’s yours,’ ” prompting a seven-year run in the position for Stewart.

Stewart spent the better part of a decade on hiatus from school choreography as she started a family.

A chance reconnection with a former Bonner & Prendie director would reopen that door.

“He has been at Malvern Prep for a long time and was in need of a choreographer. I’ve been over there for three years now. I’m telling you, it’s just the serendipitous, right place-right time (scenarios).”

Stewart resides in Springfield with her husband and their three children, ages 9, 6 and 3. She continues to teach dance at CCSD Dance Company, the successor to Cathie Collins School of Dance, now owned by Collins’ niece following Collins’ death in October 2022.

“I have the teen class, so I get them all day long. I get to work with adolescents (at Upper Darby), at the dance studio, and when it is play season at Malvern. I’m an adolescent expert at this point,” Stewart said.

With her adolescent expertise, she hopes above all her students at Upper Darby leave class with a mind open to inquiry.

“If they can walk out of here confident in their ability to think science, speak science, write science, dissect scientific reading that they’re going see come across the headlines, then I know that teaching and learning happened,” she said.

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