

A young boy with short brown hair and glasses is peeking through a vertical metal bar. He is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The background is dark and out of focus.

we2.0

Washington Education Association  
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# Opening Doors

## Stories of Unsung Heroes

# Teachers open the door. You enter by yourself.

*Chinese proverb*

**M**ore than 83,000 of you around our state have opened doors this fall for those who have been alive for just a few years to those who have been on this planet for many decades. You are opening doors of opportunity and your work is commendable. The connection you make with our students may be short in real time, but the impact can last a lifetime.

When asked why you do what you do, you are quick to talk about your passion to spark another's curiosity. Many of you knew you wanted to teach from the earliest you can remember, while others began by being involved in their own children's education. All of you have stories about why you continue even when circumstances are nearly impossible. Your contributions aren't about the hottest this or coolest that — they are about a body of work by educators — a career that truly leaves a mark on every single student.

In this issue, we share some of your stories.

## Opening Doors

“ I was always a ‘helper’ and I wanted to be a part of making life better for others. I chose public education to help provide equal outcomes



for children who already have the deck stacked against them. It's my job to level

the playing field and strive to help my students become productive members of society. I love my job and relish every tiny step and small triumph that my students work so hard to achieve. ”

*Sally Rasmussen  
Special education teacher  
North Bend Elementary School*

- 3 Sue
- 4 Noah
- 6 Amy
- 7 Dionne



# Offering nudges on students' own terms

Shelton custodian Sue Avery finds opportunities for students to build self-esteem and work ethic when they need it most.

Everyone has a story about how they began their career. Some pursue a dream and others fall into something they end up loving. For Shelton's Olympic Middle School custodian Sue Avery, it was all about a need.

"I was a single mom with a daughter and I needed health insurance. The school district office was close to where we lived and I went in every two weeks to ask if they were hiring," Avery says. Though she started on the night shift so she could keep a close eye on her daughter, Jessica Renecker (who grew up and currently works as an educational assistant at the same school as her mom), Avery found she really enjoyed working days so she could be around the kids.

And like so many WEA education support professionals, Avery began developing unique relationships with kids who might have been overlooked by others.

"There was this little boy who loved art," she says. "His family was very poor. He asked if I ever found broken colored pencils on the floor and wondered if I would save them for him if I did. I went and bought him whatever he needed but I told him that he'd have to earn the art supplies by helping me with the trash." The boy helped her and found he liked the job. He liked Avery's attention and "stayed on" long after he earned his colored pencils.

Avery says that sometimes she spots those kinds of kids and other times, they "kind of find you."

"I had this group of junior high girls, once, who would not dress down for PE. The now-retired teacher (and Shelton School Board member Gene Crater) tried to convince them to do it, but they were not going to give in. Finally, he asked me to put them to work so they wouldn't fail the class," Avery remembers. "So we had a whole routine of sweeping and mopping and cleaning up and they got their exercise. One day, the whole group didn't come to school because they were helping a friend, but they showed up sixth period to help me because they didn't want to have me do all the work myself."

While teachers and other educators open doors for students, sometimes they need a little nudge to go through. Avery is

someone who gives all students opportunities to grow and opportunities to build self-esteem and a work ethic.

"Not every child is going to be a teacher or a doctor," she says. "But if they learn good work ethics, they are going to survive." She says she would have been considered a behavior management problem when she was in school so she keeps a special eye out for kids who need help fitting in.

Avery and Paula Patteson, an educational assistant Avery calls her "partner in crime," see the kids who come in day after day without a lunch or without a proper coat or shoes. They give them the chance to earn what they need and the kids appreciate the opportunity. They connect with kids and, sometimes, help them connect with other students.

Avery has worked in elementary, middle and high schools in Shelton. Over the 22 years, she has taken time to get training in ways to clean greener and to make the schools safer for everyone.

"Sue is a leader in this district," says Shelton ESP President Cindy Roaf. "She is respected by custodians and other classified members, by teachers and by administrators. Everyone trusts her. The kids feel comfortable and safe and she makes them laugh and helps them laugh at themselves."

Avery, who is a volunteer emergency medical technician, says she sometimes contemplates what she might do next. "But I would miss the kids," she says.

*Jacob Conn originally started cleaning the lunchroom to pay off a book fine. He decided to stay because he enjoys helping Avery.*





*Noah Zeichner checks in with history student Treshawn Jackson.*

# A class that can change the world

Seattle's Noah Zeichner leads a class that gives highschoolers a global view of how their daily choices affect communities across the planet.

"In this class we assume that there are no problems on this planet that cannot be solved." That is the first sentence of the Global Leadership course syllabus Sealth High School teacher Noah Zeichner hands to his students on the first day of class.

Zeichner tells his students they are expected to learn and show leadership both in and outside of their class by solving problems and issues that affect each of them individually as well as part of their community. He tells them the class may be the most rewarding educational experience of their lives and invites them to stretch far outside of their comfort zone but, he says, in the end, "It will depend on you."

This is not part of the International Baccalaureate program in the Seattle high school nor is it honors or advanced placement. There are no letters in front of the class or behind it — it is an elective and there is a wide array of students, from those who are way

behind in their social studies credits and scampering to catch up, to high achieving students who are beefing up their electives on their way to college.

Walk into this class and picture a United Nations conference. The students, representing a myriad of ethnicities, countries and socio-economic backgrounds, are in a circle throwing balls to one another, learning new pronunciations and names they have never heard before. When interviewing one another in class, they barely look into one another's eyes as this is just the beginning of a one-semester journey that will allow them to gel into a group of students more aware of the issues around them and around the world; but more importantly, a group of students fully aware that they have the power to create change and come up with creative solutions to complex problems.

"This is as real as it gets," 32-year-old Zeichner says. "A lot of students can't connect with our six-period factory model of high school. They don't see



connection to their lives and they don't get to work on projects that help them make those connections. This class is about action."

While students explore contemporary world issues, they do it in a context of social justice and environmental stewardship. And they apply what they are learning in many ways including teaching fourth- and fifth-graders at Sanislo Elementary. They learn how to influence public officials and constituencies, practice public speaking, and are responsible for designing and carrying out local action projects on their own and with their younger counterparts.

Zeichner says the Global Leadership class was originally developed in early 2000 by a team from Global Visionaries, a non-profit group who partnered with other non-profit agencies as well as teachers at Cleveland High School. At that time, Zeichner was a Spanish and ELL instructional assistant at an elementary school when he first saw the impact the program had on high school and elementary school students.

"This is genuinely student-centered learning," Zeichner says. The students are accountable as a class for their learning. They choose jobs including being in charge of the seating chart, handling birthday celebrations, taking minutes during class meetings and making sure they are being accountable for what they decide they ought to be learning. One job is to monitor class participation ☐ o encourage those who need it and to ask those who may be monopolizing discussion to step back.

## Opening Doors

“Public education is a chance to inspire change at the grassroots level. Education, without a doubt, is the key to success all around. I love the opportunity to set a student up to achieve whatever goals they have set for themselves.”



*Weston Lucas  
English and Theater teacher  
Eatonville High School*

"A lot of times, kids don't realize that they have the power to create change," Zeichner says. "They are lit with excitement after they teach that first lesson (at an elementary school)."

All of the students are invited, but not required, to participate in a trip to Guatemala that allows them the experience of visiting a foreign country and gives them a chance to apply some of what they have practiced at home.

The class is a stand-alone elective at Sealth. And just like so many electives, Zeichner says they have to justify it every year when budgets are discussed.

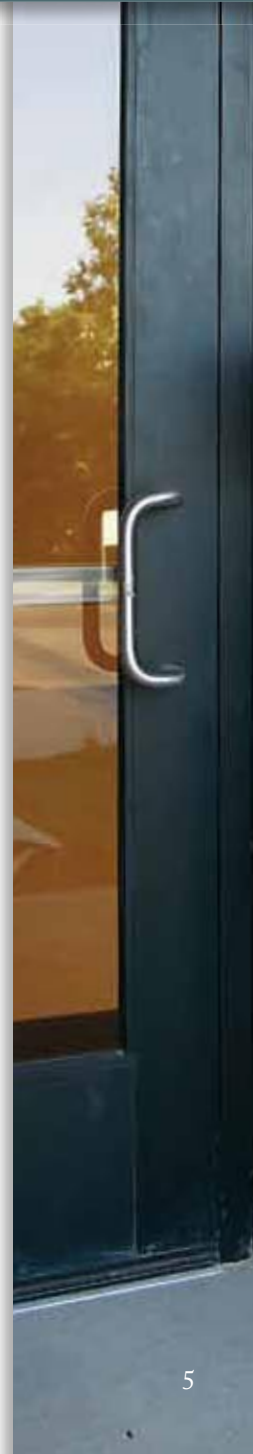
"We argue that this course is meeting Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALRs). We argue that it supports WASL learning. Students write letters to the principal each year and we are always searching for grant money," he says.

They received an NEA Foundation grant this year along with many others and he says he feels supported because of the partnerships with the non-profit community ☐ especially Global Visionaries.

So while Zeichner and his counterparts open doors for students, he is taking advantage of doors that are open to him through his Association.

What is nice, he says, is that it's not just the teacher looking for grants but that there is a team of people working together to grow the course. And as the partnerships continue to change and grow, more doors are opened and the students benefit.

*Molly Freed and her Global Leadership classmates get the chance to discuss contemporary issues including water scarcity and other environmental issues.*



# One voice: WE are UNION now

**K**ent's strike last month was not centered on wage issues.

Instead, teachers in the fourth-largest district in Washington were fighting for smaller class sizes and fewer meetings so they would have more time with students. Amy Abrams, an English teacher at Northwood Middle School, knew in

her heart and head that classroom overcrowding is not a good recipe for academic achievement. Small class size, she thought, is an issue district administrators would agree and support — and one that they would be willing to talk about at the bargaining table.

Through the negotiation process and eventual strike, hundreds of Kent EA members like Abrams found their voice through their Association. Many realized that, while a strike was the last resort, the Kent strike gave them the chance to voice what they believed and forced them to make many difficult decisions.

*We 2.0* caught up with Abrams on the strike line last month, on the eve of the tentative agreement announcement. The following is an excerpt of our conversation about opening doors for students — today and tomorrow.

"I was one of the people who at the beginning of this was opposed to a strike. In March, April and May, I kept telling people in the staff room, 'I know the District is going to do the right thing. It's a levy year. We have a new superintendent. They are not going to do this. They're going to do the right thing.'

"June comes. I'm getting a little more leery.

July comes. I'm thinking, 'Where on earth is Dr. Vargas?' I've not heard anything.'

"August comes. And then I hear about the cuts and the whole seniority snafu where they said they wanted to be able to lay off employees at will. The District wasn't addressing any of the teacher's issues. They weren't even willing to negotiate until Aug. 14 and that's when I thought, 'Oh my goodness, they really don't care about kids'.

"When I realized that KSD viewed themselves as a corporation and the whole issue of who children are and what's best for them was not on the forefront of their minds, I was livid. That is when I got really on board.

"If this strike were about anything else other than children, I would not be as militant as I am. This is 100 percent about kids and about what's best for kids, so I am 100 percent on board. I think a couple of my colleagues are very, very surprised right now. I would imagine they thought I was going to be one of the people who would be wishy washy. They were wrong. Once I knew what the district's commitment to the kids was, that was it for me. Kids can't learn or have the success they're capable of in the sizes of classes we currently have.

"I am not teaching in a corporation. I am teaching in a government-funded system where taxpayers like me (because I have students who attend school in this district) should have a say and have a right to expect, even demand quality education. That's what I'm standing up for.

"If this were about just me, I wouldn't be fighting as hard. Am I still going to be overworked? Absolutely. Am I still going to make kids write five-page papers that have been taken through the writing process? Yes. Will those papers still take me a ridiculous number of hours to correct? Yes. Am I still going to maintain high standards and create rigorous instruction despite the amount of time it takes? Yes! Why do I do it? It's best for kids. That's why I'm doing this (striking). It's best for kids. So, if I have to go to jail, I'll go to jail. If I have to pay thousands of dollars, that's what's going to happen. Let me tell you, this is a financially scary time for my family. We have already taken a huge cut in pay this year. Our savings is gone. We've had to dip into part of our children's college fund.

(My husband) is ultra-conservative but he truly believes in this and believes that I am fighting for what's right. My moral beliefs and my faith tell me the same thing. I believe I have to help those who are younger and weaker. If we adults aren't their voice, who will be? I feel I am obligated. I have a moral obligation to stick this out to the end because it is what's best for kids."

*Kaitlyn and Aaron Abrams stood behind their mother, Amy Abrams, 100 percent because the strike was about smaller class sizes and fewer meetings to allow educators to help students succeed.*





# Opening doors to potential

Vancouver's Dionne Vester offers guidance, life support for teens

If you visit Dionne Vester's office at Fort Vancouver High School, you'll notice the picture of a scuba diver above her desk. It's hard to tell at first glance, but Vester is the diver in the photograph.

As an African-American woman, she's proud she took the plunge into a sport outside the mainstream. But scuba diving meant more to her than just defying stereotypes.

"Two days before that was my first time in the ocean," says Vester, 32. "I was afraid of the water. It was my own fear keeping me

from doing it. But I do things to push the envelope for myself. I'm a lifelong learner."



Dionne Vester

That's the same message Vester sends her students.

As a guidance counselor, she's there to push and prod students into reaching potential they don't always realize they possess.

"You have choices," she tells them. "There are different paths, but you are going to continue your education somewhere."

Vester, who grew up in Federal Way, is quick to credit Federal Way High School teacher Pamela Ash for offering her the same encouragement when she was a student.

"She told me I was going to college. Period. End of story," Vester recalls. "And now I'm here."

Yet counseling wasn't Vester's first career. During two years as a manager at Old Navy, more than half of her employees were high school students. She found herself counseling them on skills like time management and how to communicate with teachers. During that same period, she toured a juvenile detention facility, homeless shelters and several related programs.

"Then it dawned on me to become a high school counselor," she says. "It popped into my head."

Now Vester is responsible for counseling 380 students — all of the VHS students with last names A through E. Many of her students come from working-class families suffering from the recession.

"There is a lot of movement and transition. You have to go where the work is, and their parents are leaving the state to find jobs."

That leaves students falling behind socially and academically. Vester works hard to connect and spend one-on-one time with those students. More time to ask the question: "What's your next step and how can I help you?"

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# Opening Doors

“ I share a vision with thousands of educators as we commit our careers to create classroom learning environments that set high standards but, above all, place students at the center of the curriculum to address their innate needs to own their learning and to direct it. I call on my students to know the power of their voices, to honor their impact, to respect language, to recognize that everyone matters. I tell them our democracy sorely needs them to be literate, analytical, and compassionate citizens, so that it can flourish through the power of their contributions. Together we educators rise to our calling when we create and promote compassionate and rigorous classrooms, where students recognize themselves as active and responsible participants in the timeless community of humankind. ”

*Susan Johnson, Cle Elum-Roslyn High School English teacher and 2009 Washington Teacher of the Year*