

By Bill Husfelt

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This is the second in a four-part series highlighting some of the civic-minded men and women who have stepped up to help alleviate the teacher shortage that is occurring nationwide. This week, we're focusing on some of our alternative certification middle school teachers.

With a Bachelor's Degree in Biology and a Master's Degree in Biology/Zoology, Erin Elliot Lange never envisioned herself in a middle school science classroom, but that's exactly where she has been for the past five years.

After college, Erin was a zookeeper and biologist but was constantly searching for the right fit for her. In 2017, Hurricane Irma decimated the Keys where she was living and prompted her to leave and relocate to Bay County. Once settled here, she was excited to begin her first year of teaching in August of 2018. Well, we all know what happened to us in 2018! Fortunately, Erin was able to navigate the challenges of the hurricane and the pandemic and now she's in her fifth year.

Erin said there are two main reasons that she keeps teaching. "I am very passionate about science and sharing it with others," she said. "I love watching students go from thinking science is boring and irrelevant to seeing it as something important to everyday life. One of my favorite things to do is to help students connect scientific principles they may have never even heard of to things they see and do every day."

Additionally, she said, "the other thing that keeps me coming back is the relationships that I get to build with students. I am keenly aware that many students don't have an adult figure in their life that they feel like they can relate to and trust. I enjoy helping them navigate the trials and tribulations of middle school and helping set them up for success later in life."

Erin also coaches soccer and says she loves "interacting with those students outside of the classroom in this way. I think it is important for them to see that you can be passionate about many different things in life (such as science and soccer)." We certainly appreciate ALL of our employees who coach, mentor students and sponsor clubs!

According to a colleague, Surfside Middle School Math Teacher Olga Khandazhapova has only been working for BDS for a few weeks but is already impacting students and staff. Olga was educated in Russia and always dreamed of being a teacher and started teaching last year in another district. This year, her colleague says, "Olga is enthusiastic about learning the school, new textbook materials and how she can help her students. We're so grateful to have her." Those sentiments are echoed by Surfside Principal Matt Pitts. "Olga Khandazhapova is one of the most fascinating individuals that I have ever met," he said. "The life lessons and personal decisions that she has had to make speak volumes to the character and type of person that Olga is. The students who get the privilege of having her as a teacher are truly lucky," he added.

Nicole Green, a U.S. History teacher at Tyndall Academy, is another #HometownHero nominated by a colleague. Nicole, who began teaching last year, comes to BDS from the juvenile justice system. Nicole became a teacher “to instill lifelong learning strategies” into her students and to “be a safe adult for them.” Currently working on a Master’s Degree in Criminology, Nicole plans to stay in the classroom where she can continue “working with students and building strong relationships with trust and compassion.” Tyndall Academy Principal Kara Mulkusky noted that Nicole “is an incredible teacher new to Middle School Social Studies. She delivers engaging lessons that motivate her students to share in her passion for the content. We are blessed to have Nicole as part of the Tyndall Academy Family!”

Teaching isn’t for everyone but is definitely the right career path for many including some of those who didn’t go to college to become teachers. We invite anyone interested in getting started on the path toward certification to email us at BDScomm@bay.k12.fl.us so we can answer questions and outline the steps. This is a GREAT time to step up and give back to our community, and our children, and we’re grateful for all of those civic-minded citizens who are answering this need.

Stay safe and God Bless!