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Everyday Heroes: Camsie Matis, Ed.M.'05

by Elizabeth Gehrman

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"Everyday Heroes," is a continuing series that tells the stories of Ed School alums who are focusing their considerable talents and efforts on teaching, administration, counseling, and other areas that impact students and their learning on a daily basis. These are the people, as we noted in a 2003 Ed. magazine feature, "leading our nation from its classrooms."



“Yo, it’s one universal law but two sides to every story

Three strikes and you be in for life, mandatory

Four MCs murdered in the last four years

I ain’t tryin’ to be the fifth one, the millennium is here...”

Does that sound like algebra to you? It probably didn’t to rapper Mos Def, either, when he wrote it, but it’s music to the ears of New York City school teacher Camsie Matis, Ed.M.’05. That’s because it’s what she uses to get her 9th graders in the mood for math on the first day of class every semester at the East Side Community High School, on 12th Street and Avenue A in lower Manhattan.

“I think relationships are really important in the classroom,” says Matis, “and talking about something the kids can relate to on the first day helps me get to know them and what they’re interested in. And it gets them engaged in the work by making it more real.”

Whenever possible, Matis uses real-world examples to draw her students in — showing them how algebraic

reasoning helps in the grocery store, for example, or when comparing cell-phone plans, and taking a day off from her scheduled lessons when the news calls for it, such as when immigration protests let her introduce the topic of statistics last year.

The real world is clearly a place in which Matis feels comfortable. When she became disillusioned with the political-science doctoral program she had entered in 1998 at the University of California at Berkeley, she says, “I thought I should do something different. I started volunteering at an afterschool program in West Oakland, which is a very, very low income, very depressed community. And I just fell in love with the kids.”

She dropped out of the Ph.D. program and got an emergency credential to teach in the city’s Westlake Middle School, simultaneously taking education courses at California State University Hayward. “I just kind of went in,” she recalls. “They didn’t give me a whole lot of resources — not even a textbook. So I talked to other teachers, talked to my mom, who’s a teacher, and went on the Internet.” Within three years, she was department chair. “At inner city schools, if you last three years, you’re a veteran.”

To keep students interested, she translated her political science background to the classroom. “I was interested in how systems and institutions help create democracy,” she says, “and I’ve found that the same sorts of ideas apply to schools. Adolescents, especially inner-city adolescents, lack structure in their lives, so I find that it’s important to provide a high level of structure in the classroom.”

And of course incentives never hurt. Literal brownie points mean 20 to 30 percent more homework is turned in to Matis than to most of her peers: For each assignment a student completes, he or she gets two points; for each one missed, a point is taken away. When students reach 100 points, they get a brownie, home-baked by Matis.

Clearly doing something right, Matis applied to HGSE, where visiting professor Ted Sizer recommended her for an administrative job at a start-up school in the South Bronx called the New Day Academy. Though she enjoyed the challenge, she quickly realized that, in addition to hating the 90-minute commute from her house in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, she hated to be away from her students.

“I’m unusual in that I’m better with struggling students than with gifted ones. I find I have a better rapport with them, and so few teachers for low-level kids choose the inner city. I had this chance to go to Harvard, the number-one school in the nation for education. Kids in the inner city don’t get to choose what school they go to, so I figured I’d bring myself to them. I think that’s why I haven’t burned out after all this time.”

Still, the challenges remain. Among them, lack of discipline, lack of parental involvement, and lack of incentives for her colleagues. “One of the big things I’m interested in,” Matis says, “is how to keep good teachers teaching, especially in the inner city. Money helps, but curriculum is what drives the classroom, and structures help keep it on the right track. For me, an engaging curriculum, like real-life math and rap music on the first day, that’s the real meat of the classroom.”

Other Everyday Heroes:

Rob Stein, C.A.S.'93, Ed.D.'01

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