

STORY **CHRISTINE BERNIER LIENKE**

TEACHING INSPIRATION: *Amber Damm*

Amber Damm is breathless these days. Whether she's rushing to or from her classroom where she teaches middle school youth or speaking at events across the state, it's all in a day's work for the **2009 Minnesota Teacher of the Year**.





Amber is a master at managing the clock and knowing how quickly class time evaporates. She credits her students with energy, wisdom and curiosity that make her days exciting.

In the Classroom

This year Amber is teaching English/Language Arts to 150 seventh- and eighth-grade students at Clara Barton Open School in Minneapolis, Minnesota, a magnet school where she has taught since 2001.

Upon entering Amber's classroom, you find an environment filled with interesting, thought-provoking images and warmth. Behind her desk is a single word prominently painted in red and framed which reads, "Imagine." That singular word indicates that you've entered a special place where the pursuit for knowledge is fiercely embraced and the creativity of today's youth is encouraged and fostered.

When the bell sounds, 28 students stream into Amber's classroom. A master at managing the clock and knowing how quickly class time evaporates, Amber immediately gets to work. Her authoritative, yet nurturing tone, grabs the attention and respect of students instantly and Amber joyfully says, "Welcome to fourth hour! My favorite hour of the day!"

While introducing the word of the day, Amber swiftly moves about the room distributing a heaping mound of fish crackers to each table of students, reminding them to use the hand sanitizer if needed. Then just as swiftly, Amber sets out to tackle analyzing a Yeats' poem with the class – it's all in a day's work for this spectacular teacher.

Students freely call her Amber as though she were their writing companion, or perhaps their muse, but certainly equals. In turn, Amber refers to the students as "ladies and gentleman," exhibiting the common respect felt among them.

The children in the classroom buzz with anticipation and participate excitedly as they conduct their assignment to recreate their own "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" poem the likes of Yeats. The students collaborate, confer and excitedly offer each other feedback throughout the poetry writing session.

These young adults rewrite Yeats' Innisfree poem, developing prose about places they've been or dream to see – Fisherman's Wharf, Madeline Island or the Gulf of Mexico.

After listening to an audiotape of Yeats himself recite his poetry, the students then individually recite their newly written poems in quavering vocal imitation of the famed poet. The class encourages each other with enthusiasm by snapping their fingers wildly, as their form of applause, after each student shares a personally tailored Yeats' poem.

The children in Amber's classroom are as colorful as flowers in a garden, all growing and blooming under Amber's tutelage. Amber listens attentively as the students read their poetry aloud; she makes encouraging remarks such as "make it sound a wee bit more majestic," or "you are the master poet who can rework words in any way that he or she desires." Her words gratify, instruct and affirm the students' work.

Amber inspires children to ask more, want more and expect more. The children depart with smiles and words of encouragement to one another and even though Amber may be breathless, it's clear why she was nominated to represent Minnesota as Teacher of the Year.

Amber's Background

Early on, Amber was interested in becoming an architect but after becoming inspired by the complexities of the education process and seeing how difficult that process can be for many, she decided to pursue a career in teaching, building minds instead of architecture.

An Illinois native, Amber pursued her undergraduate degree in Minneapolis after which she applied to the University of Minnesota's Master's of Education program in English and was fortunate to be one of 35 selected from 500 applicants to the program. ▶

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That singular word indicates that you've entered a special place where the pursuit for knowledge is fiercely embraced and the creativity of today's youth is encouraged and fostered.

Like most women today, Amber is skilled at juggling both home and career. In addition to working as an exceptional teacher at Barton, Amber is also married to former social studies teacher Jeff Damm, and mother of a stepchild, Mahalia, who currently is a student in Amber's classroom.

Over the course of her 11 years as a teacher, Amber has not only touched the lives of Clara Barton students, but in 2004 she volunteered to teach in Swaziland, Africa, participating in the Dream for Africa AIDS/HIV education program to educate young people in high schools across Africa about the effects of AIDS.

"Leaving the United States and seeing firsthand the AIDS crisis in Swaziland was a life-changing experience," says Amber. "I spent 31 days working in three high schools with kids who were so similar to my own students in that they were enthusiastic, intelligent and hilarious, yet their lives were threatened constantly because of behaviors and the dangers of AIDS all around them. I returned to Minneapolis determined to share my experience with my students and their families, and I did."

The Nomination

Amber's dedication to her vocation led parents to nominate her for the 2009 Minnesota Teacher of the Year Award. Additional letters by students and colleagues espousing Amber's best qualities helped clinch the nomination.

"Amber was able to coax and encourage this fragile butterfly out of her cocoon and give her wings to fly," writes Gary Miller about Amber's teaching relationship with his daughter. "She teaches (and lives her life) from a strong ethical base that is committed to reaching the best in every individual learner, no matter what their learning needs are ..."

A student shares his experience having Amber as his seventh grade

teacher: "Amber helped me become a great poet ... even though I am at school, Amber is like a second mom," writes Mohamed Hussien. "She helps me get through the tough times by listening to my side and not judging me by the past. She respects my opinions and feelings."

Now as Teacher of the Year, Amber travels across the state speaking to various groups, fitting in speaking engagements around her daily teaching responsibilities.

"It's a privilege and I'm excited to do it," says Amber of performing the duties as Teacher of the Year. "It's hard for me to leave the classroom. My students – their energy, their wisdom, their curiosity – make my days exciting and always unpredictable. Traveling and speaking to teachers is an honor, and I'm loving the opportunity to represent teachers. What is onerous at times is trying to give my family, students and the people I'm visiting 100 percent. I don't want to short-change anyone in all of this, including myself."

Since winning the Minnesota Teacher of the Year Award, Amber will now compete for the National Teacher of the Year Award. The National Teacher of the Year is released from classroom duties during their year of recognition to travel nationally and internationally as a spokesperson for the teaching profession. Competing against teachers from each of the 50 states and five from extra-state jurisdictions, Amber will travel to Washington D.C. where President Obama will announce the winner at a Rose Garden ceremony. *W*



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