

2017 NCTE Outstanding Middle Level Educator Award Narrative: David Rockower

I'm both deeply honored and humbled to be nominated for such an award. I work with many dedicated, creative, passionate teachers in my own school. I know that thousands of other teachers are squeezing every ounce of their time, resources, and energy to deliver the best curriculum possible.

One of my favorite quotes is, "Teaching might even be the greatest of the arts since the medium is the human mind and spirit." -John Steinbeck. Most of us find ourselves in this profession because we want to influence change, develop critical thinkers, and inspire a love of literacy. This can only happen when there is trust between teacher and student; it all begins with authentic relationships.

I use time before school, during lunch, and between classes to listen and learn about each student's life. I discover who dreams of traveling but has never been on a plane, who teaches her mother to cook after school, and who is determined to be the next Usain Bolt. I begin to understand why Karen's confidence is soaring and why Billy can't look anyone in the eye. I will use this knowledge to be a better teacher throughout the school year. I will use it when I search for books that may resonate with a particular student. I will use it when they say, "I can't think of a writing topic." They will read about real and fictional characters who face struggles similar to their own, and they will take risks in their writing, exploring experiences they might otherwise bury and ignore. This kind of learning can only occur in a safe, nurturing environment, where everyone feels safe to share experiences and ideas.

Throughout my nineteen years in the profession, I've had the opportunity to work with every grade level, K12. My certifications include elementary (K-6), English (7-12), reading specialist (K-12), Librarian (K-12), and Administrative (K-12). I hold a Masters degree in Library Media and Information Technology. Working with each grade level—as an elementary classroom teacher, a gifted support teacher, and a librarian—has helped me better understand the social and educational journey of a child in today's world. I must admit, however, my heart is with middle school students.

I currently teach in a small, democratic, public school, where community and student voice are foundational. My classes are mixed grade level (5-8), and I develop my own curriculum based on student interest and teacher passion. Some of my semester-long courses include Literacy Through Photography; Grimm's Fairy Tales; 20,000 Words/Writing for Publication; Poetry & Memoir; and Graphic Novels. In each class, I weave common core standards into our lessons and projects. More than anything, I am teaching students how to embrace life. While a science teacher may use experiments and proofs, and a social studies teacher may use social and political dilemmas, I use stories.

If I'm asking my students to become readers and writers, I must model this behavior. Staying up to date with middle grade and young adult books is crucial. I read what my students read, and we regularly "booktalk" and share titles with one another. I've served as a judge for *Letters About Literature*, a contest that allows students to write letters to their favorite authors. I also write for *State College Magazine*, where I pen a bi-monthly column called *Family Matters*. My students know I write, because I share my essays and stories with them. Additionally, I've published teaching articles in *Education Week*, *Teaching K-8 Magazine*, and *Catalyst For Change*. Reading and writing are part of my life outside of school, and my students know this.

When I reflect on my own time as a student, I realize my most memorable learning experiences were endeavors that took time and led us outside of the classroom. Frequently, we feel pressure to finish and move on to the next task, but when we find ways to slow down and immerse ourselves in learning, we create memories. Just this year, my class participated in a cross-generational poetry project. We visited a retirement community and interviewed the residents, asking them specific questions about their memories of being a middle schooler. After returning to our school, students wrote poems about the lives of the residents. Later, we returned to the retirement community, where we read and presented each resident with a "Where I'm From" poem about his or her life. Later, one of my most cynical students said, "That was incredible. I could listen to their stories all day." The experience was moving for all involved.

Last summer, in preparation for my graphic novels course, I obtained a grant that allowed our school to purchase a mini-library of graphic novels. These novels have become a springboard for some of our reluctant readers. One month into the course, a student said, “For the first time, I feel like a successful reader.” She has since branched out and is now enthusiastically reading, writing, and talking about many different genres.

I became a better teacher when I learned to release control to my students. The longer I teach, the shorter my lessons have become. Students at our school requested a class where they could write—really write—for most of the period. And, they wanted the opportunity to be published. So, *20,000 Words/ Writing for Publication* was born. While preparing for this course, I identified many contests and publications that sought young writers. After sharing these opportunities for publication, my students are writing poetry, fiction, and personal essays. During class time, we hear nothing but the clicking of keys or the scratching of pencil on paper. My teaching happens one-on-one, when I conference with each student. I can help Maggie with sentence structure, and Greg is ready to talk about semicolon use. Carrie is developing strong imagery, and Devon is employing metaphor. I find I’m still teaching all parts of the writing process, but it’s far more personalized, which allows me to differentiate naturally. Thus far, one student placed first in our local public library’s *Write and Illustrate Your Own Book* contest; another student’s *This I Believe* essay was selected to be read on our local public radio station; many student book reviews appear on the *PCTELA* Blog; and several other students have work featured on *Teen Ink.com*.

I see my students’ engagement—or lack thereof—as a direct reflection of me. If they are bored or uninterested, I need to adjust and come back with a new strategy. Being a middle school English teacher offers a roller coaster of emotions. Some days I go home feeling fulfilled and successful, while other days I kick myself and want a re-do. But as an adult, what more could one ask for? I want a job that challenges me, makes me think, and allows me to influence our most precious medium—the human mind and spirit. So even on the days when things didn’t go as planned, I’m thankful for the opportunity to teach.