

Massillon Independent: Indian River Teacher Named Tops in State

9-24-11 Erin Pustay

<http://www.indeonline.com/newsnow/x463301861/Indian-River-teacher-named-tops-in-the-state>

When everyone else gives in, Amanda Crist is just getting started.

When just about everyone else throws up their hands in frustration, Crist is there with a warm smile, gentle words of encouragement and the belief that no matter what, success always is an option.

That kind of attitude is unique and that brand of determination is rare. Even in her profession.

As a teacher, Crist faces the typical educational challenges.

But as a teacher at Indian River School — a school at the Indian River Juvenile Correctional Facility that gives incarcerated youths the chance to continue schooling while serving court-ordered sentences — she faces unique challenges.

But she meets those challenges with grace and vigor.

That's why Crist, who is in her 10th year of teaching at Indian River, was chosen by the Correctional Education Association of Ohio as the 2011 Teacher of the Year.

Tony Korzan, principal of Indian River School, noted that Crist, an office technology teacher, truly stands out as one of the finest teachers in the state. There's something special about the way she approaches her job every day.

"Amanda has proven herself to be a remarkably responsible and confident young woman," Korzan wrote in recommending her for the award. "I see her to be an outstanding representative for the teachers in the State of Ohio"

Crist admits that she sees every moment she has in her classroom as an opportunity to inspire her students. Life has not always been easy for them and someone, she said, needs to be believe in their abilities.

She wants to be that person.

"I always tell them, 'don't be afraid to set the bar high,'" Crist said. "A lot of them made a bad decision somewhere along the line, but they are very capable of overcoming that if they are willing to rise to the occasion."

To give them the leverage they need to climb over every obstacle, Crist chooses first to treat each of her students with respect and kindness. She doesn't look at them through the lens of what they have done. She chooses to see them for the people they are today, in this moment.

"The 'Golden Rule' goes a long way," Crist said. "You just keep coming at them with kindness. Eventually, they start to think, 'this lady is crazy. I might as well be nice to her.'"

When she can break through the barriers, she can turn the students on to learning in ways they never expected. She sees them take pride in their work and their abilities. Confidence like that, she said, is the start to overcoming anything.

"So many of (the students) were ridiculed by other students or felt ridiculed so they built up a lot of barriers to learning," Crist said, noting they just need to learn to believe in themselves.

Students aren't allowed to take their work out of class, but occasionally, Crist will see a student trying to sneak an A+ paper past her and out the door – the equivalent of hanging an aced test on the fridge.

"I'll tell you, that never gets old," Crist said of the homework sneakers. "They'll do that sometimes if they know a family member is coming to visit. They want to show off all the good things they have done."

Crist never would have dreamed that those would be the professional moments she would savor. As a student at the University of Mount Union, she was focused on finance. Her dream was to make it big in New York City and she vowed she would do that. But just as she was getting ready to follow that dream, life derailed her plans. The terrorist attacks in New York City in 2001 forced her to rethink – at least temporarily – what to do.

On a whim, she responded to a want ad in the newspaper seeking a teacher for Indian River School. She never expected to get the job and, certainly, she never expected to take it.

But something happened when she stepped into the classroom to observe another class at the correctional facility.

It felt right.

"I really felt like I had something to offer," Crist said. "I feel like I can establish a rapport with at-risk students. When I came into the classroom to observe, I just got the feeling that things were going to be good here. I like the challenge and I like the diversity."

By this point, Crist is used to the raised eyebrows and the looks of confusion on people's faces

when they learn she teaches at the correctional facility.

“People always look at you like that,” Crist said with a laugh. “They are always asking ‘Why would you want to teach there?’ They assume it’s because I couldn’t make it in a public school, but that’s not true. I don’t want a job in a public school. I want to be here. I want to work with the students that the public school couldn’t handle.”

Amanda Crist

Indian River School, office technology teacher

Age 32

Number of years in the profession 10

Hometown Canton

Education University of Mount Union, 2001; Ashland University (MBA), 2007

Pets A Sheepdog named Dr. Seuss

Interests and hobbies Has played the french horn in the Alliance Symphony for 12 years; Active in church Grace United Methodist Church.

Favorite TV show “I really like documentaries and I want to get one of those T-shirts that say, ‘Everything I learned, I learned on 20/20.’”

The song you can't get out of your head "Firework," by Katy Perry.

Guilty pleasure "The Real Housewives"

One thing your students taught you Patience. I might not always get the response I am looking for right away, but I just need to be patient and keep being persistent because it’s eventually going to click.

Three people, dead or alive, you would like to have coffee with Richard Nixon, Michael Jackson and Peter Jennings.

Actor you would you want to play you in a movie about your life Charlize Theron.

Two items on your bucket list I want to get back to New Mexico where I did my student

teaching. ... Also, my fiance is from Belgium and Spain and I am desperate to get back overseas.