

Getting to Know Mrs. Harrison

Anna (Annie) Harrison is a 5th grade teacher at Forest View Elementary. She has been teaching for 5 years. This is her 2nd year at Forest View.

Where are you originally from?

I was born in Kentucky, moved to Indiana, went to college in Baltimore, and then moved here, so I'm from lots of places!

When did you know you wanted to become a teacher and what influenced you to make that choice? Was there something else you considered doing before deciding to teach?

I knew I wanted to teach when I was very young, but the college that I chose didn't have an education program, so I majored in English instead. I worked in university administration in Baltimore, and then studied photography and started a photography business that grew really quickly when we moved here. When I got older and had kids, I saw what great things they were doing in school, so I decided to change careers and go back to school to become a teacher. I sold my half of the business to my photography partner and used that to get my Masters degree in teaching from UNCG.

What kind of student were you? Was there anything that was incredibly difficult for you to learn?

I was a pretty good student, and I really LOVED to read. Reading, writing, and spelling were always easy for me, so those were my favorite subjects. I REALLY struggled with math, probably because I didn't get a very good start with skills like multiplication and division. I had to work really hard to understand my math classes as I got older, and I ended up working one-on-one with a teacher who helped me catch up.

What are some of the things you love about teaching?

I think that kids should be heard and understood, and teaching reading, writing, and speaking skills are really important to me. There are a lot of issues in the world that kids can help solve, but they have to communicate well first! Watching kids think hard, solve problems, and keep trying to do new things makes me really excited and happy.

What makes your classroom unique or different from other classrooms?

We try to make our room as much like a family home as possible: sometimes we take our shoes off, we like to sit all around the room, and we have high expectations for each other that help us show how we feel about each other. I also let my students write their own rules in the beginning of the year, based on what they want to accomplish during their fifth-grade year. Our rules this year, completely produced by the students, are:

Let others have the spotlight when they need it.

Don't just hear - listen.

Don't just look - see.

Practice respect in all you do.

What do you hope your average student would say when asked to describe you?

I hope they would say that they feel loved and supported in my classroom, and that they know I believe they're capable of big things, which is why I have such high expectations for their behavior and effort. We work hard together, and we play hard together, and I would hope they know how important both of those things are to me!

What do you actually think your average student would say when asked to describe you?

I'm guessing they would also say that I'm loud, silly, dramatic, and funny... We do a lot of laughing and make a lot of noise! They'd probably also say that I drink too much coffee and I'm disorganized, but that's true, so I wouldn't be mad at that.

What are some of the difficult parts of your job you wish people outside of the profession could understand a little better? Only answer what you're comfortable saying.

Sometimes I think that parents see teachers as unapproachable or think that we don't want to work with them, which is totally untrue! I've been really lucky, because I've always felt like parents and teachers make great partners, and "my" parents have always been supportive if I've had questions or worries about their kids. I hope that parents know that even though teachers are overworked, overstressed, and can forget to return emails and calls (um, like I do), we really, really want to see their children succeed and go on to have great lives and their involvement means a lot to us.

We all had our ideas for what teaching would be like before we started. How is the idea you had of what teaching is like different from the actual reality of teaching?

There is so much more to do in a day than I expected. Between meetings, paperwork, planning, setting up and maintaining the classroom, and all the other things that have to get done every day, I often work 10-12 hour days. I'm tired most of the time, but I know that it's all part of the gig now.

Who was your favorite teacher while you were a student?

My favorite teacher was my high school English teacher, Mrs. Martin. She helped me focus and encouraged me to wonder, change, and improve my world. She also listened when I really needed someone to help me make choices about my future.

If you had the chance to tell them what their impact was on your life, what you would want to say to them the most?

I reconnected with Mrs. Martin via Facebook two years ago and was able to tell her how much her listening meant to me. She was a great teacher and really encouraged my love of great literature, but more than anything else, she genuinely cared about her students. She's retired now and, in her eighties, but spent her entire career in the same high school, and I'm sure she had the same impact on thousands of other high schoolers in Indiana.

Who is your favorite coworker, or possibly, who do you look at and say, "Wow, they are such a fantastic teacher."? What is it about them that makes them stand out to you?

I'm so lucky, because I have the strongest grade level team EVER! We back each other up with both school and personal issues; when I was sick and needed sub plans copied, they handled it, and when I finished a huge project for my doctoral classes last semester, they were the first ones to congratulate me. All five of them are really dear to me.

Can you think of a student you've had in your career that makes you think, "Yes, this is why I do this?"

I had a student last year who came to the US from the Dominican Republic about a month before school started. She worked SO hard to learn English and catch up with her classmates, and by the end of the year she was not only on grade level, but exceeding all expectations and scored a five on her EOGs. Her drive to learn was contagious, and other students started pushing harder because they saw how good it made her feel. And there's a kid like that every year, who leads without even trying because they want success so badly. It's really wonderful to watch that fire catch and burn the whole class!

At the end of the day, teaching is really hard. In order to keep coming back, we all have to have something we can hang our hat on. What keeps you coming back?

The idea that I can help at least one child believe that they can change the world. Kids are so smart. We don't give them enough credit for what they know and believe. If I can get just one student to stand up and say, listen, this is wrong or important or can be changed and made better - if that happens, then I've done what I wanted to do.

If you could tell your students what you really feel about them, without any chance for them to respond or ruin the moment, what would you tell them?

That they are so loved, whether they struggle academically or coast along three grade levels above; whether they spend half their time in the office or on Falcon Patrol; whether they were born at Duke or in another country. They're all "my" kids, and I believe that they're capable of such amazing things.

If you could talk to a teacher starting out. Just getting ready to take over their first classroom. What wisdom would you impart to them?

Expect the unexpected, and know that you will not be prepared for at least 80% of what happens during an average day. Teacher school gives you a solid foundation, but it doesn't make you a good teacher - you grow into that by living the life day by day, and hitting obstacles, juggling too much work, and worrying about far too many children for far too long. So when it feels hard, it means you're doing it right, and it's going to help you grow into something remarkable.

Mrs. Harrison, thank you so much for letting us get to know you better. You make our Falcon community better each and every day. You are the best!