

An Interview with Stephen Sotolongo

Name:

Stephen Sotolongo

Position:

4th grade

How long have you been teaching?

This is my 6th year

Where are you originally from?

Durham NC

**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've always enjoyed working with kids and helping lead people, but originally I wanted to major in communications and go into sports journalism.

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

I wasn't the best student in middle school. Got into trouble for not doing my work and goofing around too much. With support from teachers and my family though, I found a system that works best for me. I wasn't the best test taker but gained a lot of knowledge from classroom discussions. My struggles are what really drove me to become a teacher. It helped me learn there is no perfect student. There's no exact formula to learning. Each student, and adult take in information differently. Unlocking that in kids can be challenging, but my teachers never gave up on me.

What are some of the things you love about teaching?

Helping children reach a potential they never knew possible is an incredible thing. They exceed what they thought was possible and witnessing that is something that cannot be duplicated in any other profession.

What makes your classroom unique or different from other classrooms?

The overall approach I take is different from some other teachers. There is a lot of laughter and joking.

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

I hope they say that I am fun and I care about them, not just as students, but as people.

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

I think it would be pretty similar. Truly caring about people is a difficult emotion to fake. Students can see right through you if you're fake with them. You have to truly care about them in order for them to buy in.

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.

How much work must be put in outside of 8:55-4:00. If you treat this job as simply working during those hours it will be difficult to find success. Also, the emotional toll it can take. As stated earlier I am an emotional passionate teacher. That leads to incredible highs, but when your kids are hurting, you're hurting too.

Who was your favorite teacher while you were a student?

Ms. Suggs and Mr. Wilson. I still remember how much Ms. Suggs loved every student that walked into her classroom. Mr. Wilson blended humor into his teaching in a way that made me truly enjoy being in his class. He wasn't the typical teacher and that resonated with me.

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?

Thank you for accepting me for who I was. It allowed me to become more confident in myself as a student and learner, and through that I empower my students to show a similar confidence.

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?

My whole fourth grade team comes in every day and supports each other. Part of working in this profession is you have highs and lows. When we experience highs, we share and celebrate each other. When we have lows, we pick each other up and support. We work and move together as a true team making sure we support each other whenever it's needed.

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

There are several but, yes one in particular who I still maintain a relationship with. He reminds me of myself. Loves to play and have fun but, school doesn't come easily. On the last day of school... it was heartbreaking. Forest View was his home, the teachers and students here were his family. Those are connections you don't get in other professions.

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 kids and successes discussed earlier. Knowing that these successes could never be found elsewhere.

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 I love all of them, that I am so proud of all of them. That they are the reason I come in early and stay late. That I am fully invested and all in on every one of them.

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?

Be patient and realistic with yourself. Set achievable goals for yourself and don't put too much on your plate. You will fail, you will succeed. If you only focus on the failures, you will not experience long term success. Make work fun, find a way. Whether it's with coworkers or your students, just have fun every day. Laugh every day.