

The Power of the Core: Former Cleveland High Students Return to Teach

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Pictured here, left to right, are Tony Saavedra, Lori Howe, Donna Hill, Rebecca Williams, and Marisa Del Pino—four of whom are former Cleveland Humanities Magnet students who returned to teach and work—and Donna Hill, middle, who once taught them.

Thirty years ago a teacher named Neil Anstead had a vision: He wanted to start a high school humanities magnet that would take a group of dedicated teachers and allow them to teach to their passions.

The school's core curriculum has morphed and changed with the times but today the Cleveland Humanities Magnet lives on, as one of the most successful and highest performing programs in all of Los Angeles.

Indeed, the pull and power of the program has been so strong that eight—or a nearly a quarter of the 29 teachers and staff in the magnet program—are graduates who returned to their alma mater to teach.

Jason Firestein, a 12th grade Visual Culture and AP Literature teacher, Jenny Ewald, a 9th and 10th

grade, Rebecca Williams, an 11th and 12th grade Literature teacher, Lori Howe, Magnet Counselor, Marisa Del Pino, a 9th and 11th grade English Teacher, Paola Prato, a 10th grade Art History teacher, Shoshana Taitz, a counselor, and Tony Saavedra, an AP US History teacher, all attended Cleveland Humanities Magnet as students.

“Rather than going to a place where they are teaching as an isolated teacher in a room, they are coming to Cleveland to become full-time, life-long students,” said Donna Hill, who has taught at the Humanities Magnet for 22 years, and considers herself a “grandmother of the program” because she has students, who became teachers, whose own students have returned to teach. “There is a lot of camaraderie. A lot of collegial working together that is not duplicated too many places. Teachers who have come—even long term subs and have left—have a desire to come back. They love the work ethic. The sharing of intellectual ideas.”

At Cleveland there is a core, interdisciplinary curriculum for each grade level. Ninth graders study Global Studies, 10th graders Western Civilization, 11th graders American Studies and 12th, Modern Thought. There are no textbooks. Each year teachers work together to create their own teaching materials and team teach to the interdisciplinary thematic. Teachers meet over vacations, during the winter, spring and summer breaks and week to week, to work with, refine and add to the lesson plans of teachers who have come before.

Each year teachers add to the body of knowledge they have with the most up-to-date modern theories and thinkers. As a result class syllabi often feel more like college than high school.

Cleveland Humanities Magnet is the model curriculum for over 40 Humanitas programs throughout LAUSD. In collaboration with the Los Angeles Education Partnership, hundreds of teachers have participated in seminars and institutes led by Cleveland Magnet teachers.

The team teaching system requires dedication on the part of teachers and support from the school staff, but ironically it turns out to be the demanding nature of the program that most appeals to those who return.

“Working with the other teachers in the program who are dedicated to what they do—with great people in general—makes it a great place to work,” said teacher Tony Saavedra, who graduated from Cleveland Humanities Magnet in 1999, and has been teaching there for 6 years. “All the teachers know how rigorous the program is and there is something about that. We expect a lot of the students and we also expect a lot of one another. And because we work in an interdisciplinary fashion, we really do rely on each other. If we do not do our part, you really feel it.”

Saavedra said he fell in love with history in 11th grade and knew he would go on to study more history. Once he got into teaching, he said, he always looked back at Cleveland as a place he wanted to end up at some point. He taught for one year at Northridge Academy, then returned.

Marisa Del Pino graduated in 2002. She loves that Cleveland teachers do not take a curriculum that is handed to them, but rather create one on their own to develop young people who will walk through the world writing and thinking critically.

“I can honestly say that the Core program changed my life, and truly opened my eyes to the transformative power of public education,” said Del Pino. She said she idolized her teachers—some of whom she teaches alongside today. “These were teachers that did not just lecture or read ideas out of a book, but human beings who came to each and every class with a passion like I had never seen before.”

Del Pino said she vividly remembers sitting in class so in awe of certain teachers that it was hard to decide whether to look down and take notes, because she feared if she averted her eyes she would miss something.

“It was magical,” she said. “It is something that is very hard for me to describe today.”

Hill, the “grandmother” of the program, said the Cleveland Magnet has fought through its whole existence to maintain what it has. In an era of extreme budget cuts and an increased focus on standardized test scores, she said students know when they leave that the magnet is a very unique program.

“Even if they wanted to duplicate it somewhere else, they would have an extremely hard time doing it, so I think they would rather come back to the original and help it.”

She said students often tell her, and her colleagues, that they are leaving for college, but they would love to come back and teach at Cleveland if they could. They loved the curriculum, and they know that feeling can be prolonged if they come back.

“It is an expectation of ours,” she said. “We expect some students to continuously come back.” And perhaps the next generation is already waiting in the wings.

On a recent afternoon, as a group of 12th graders sat and talked to a reporter, one student with a scruffy beard and tie-dyed T-shirt told of how he fell in love with history and the Cleveland Humanities Magnet the very first day he walked on campus.

“Oh, I plan to come back here and teach,” he said. “This place changed my life.”