

Super Hero Origins: Why Did You Become an Educator?



From Wonder Woman to Batman to Iron Man, super heroes have “origin stories” that explain why they do what they do. Have you ever wondered what inspired our very own super heroes—the Skinner North teachers and staff—to become educators?

Many of our school’s team found their inspiration to teach from their very own educators, including kindergarten teacher **Kelly Mulligan**, who knew from the time she was in first grade that she wanted to be a teacher. “I have always loved kids and looked up to the teachers who stood out to me over the years. I wanted to be just like them and make a difference with the children I teach.” **Breanne Lee**, our fourth grade literacy teacher, wanted to share her positive feelings about school. “I loved school and wanted to help bring that same joy to other students!”

Jon Popowich, one of our physical education teachers, said, “I had some great teachers growing up who inspired me to go into education.” **Priya Shah**, our seventh and eighth grade social studies teacher, agreed. “A handful of teachers had a tremendous impact on the choices I made later in life. My hope is to have that same impact on my students.”

Kylie Noecker, one of our third grade teachers, found her inspiration closer to home. “My initial desire to become an educator began when I was young, growing up with my dad, who was a middle school principal. After working in the advertising industry for four years, I realized my true passion was to become a teacher, so I went back to school.”

Most people do not get into the teaching profession for the paycheck—they do it for the passion they have for teaching. **Crystal Oswald**, Skinner North’s fifth grade literacy teacher is one of those and said, “I have always had a passion to help children learn.” One of our second grade teachers, **Carrie O’Malley**, agreed. “As I got older, I realized that interacting with kids was a passion of mine and I wanted to help kids love school like I did. And the fact that I don’t mind embarrassing myself in front of them helps them to like me, too!” Art teacher **Sarah Willett** said, “I became an educator to help students nurture and develop their own creativity through authentic art-making experiences.”

People who love teaching usually love learning, too. At Skinner North, many of our teachers are lifelong learners and wish to pass that on to their students. **Danielle Valhuerdi**, a Skinner North fourth grade reading, writing and social studies teacher, said that she loves “reading books and getting continuous opportunities to learn new things or expand my understanding. Teaching was a match made for me!” **Natalie Machado**, our seventh and eighth grade science



Jon Popowich was named “Teacher of the Month” by the Chicago Blackhawks

teacher, described herself as a “science enthusiast and persistent learner.” She said, “Do I expect all of my students to love science? Not at all, but I hope they gain a passion to continue learning, observing, and questioning.”

For **Lindsay Mueller**, the Skinner North seventh and eighth grade literacy and writing teacher, her inspiration came from the toy box. “I used to play ‘school’ by reading to my stuffed animals. I have always known that I love working with children.”

Sometimes, being at the right place at the right time can change your life. **Alison Ridgway**, our school’s seventh and eighth grade math teacher, worked with pre-teens at a camp during the summer between her freshmen and sophomore years of college. “I loved their enthusiasm, humor, and passion for making things better. That summer was really transformative for me! When I came back to school, I switched majors from psychology to middle childhood education and chose language arts and math as my two concentration areas.”



Artist rendering of Lindsay Mueller reading to her childhood toys



Alison Ridgway during her surprise Golden Apple Fellow announcement

Some of our Skinner North super heroes have the purest of motives: making a difference in the world. Third grade teacher **Laura Shakespeare** said, “I love working with kids and I am very passionate about providing equal education experiences to all children from all backgrounds.” **Kristen Polotsky**, our fifth and sixth grade science teacher, could not agree more. She said, “I wanted to work with low-income youth and help marginalized people and people of color find their voice and learn to make a difference in their family, community, and world. Teaching felt like a tangible way to make an immediate difference.”

When it comes to teaching, maybe love is all you need. When asked why he became an educator, **Ramiro Santillan**, our security and technology staffer, simply said, “I love kids!” He’s not alone. **Sarah Kinsella**, one of our first grade teachers, agreed, saying, “I love working with children and it comes very naturally to me.”

Remember, not all super heroes wear capes or tights. Some wear Skinner North staff IDs and big smiles on their faces!