

South Carolina LIVING

TEACH FOR AMERICA

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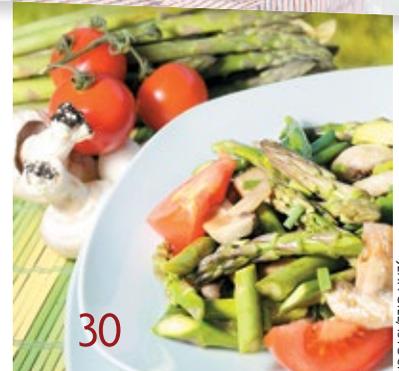
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S.C. STATE MUSEUM



Annie Ciechanowski, a math teacher at Clio Elementary Middle School, is one of more than 100 Teach for America corps members working to ensure all South Carolina students have an equal shot at a great education. Photo by Milton Morris



Participating in Teach for America has convinced ANNIE CIECHANOWSKI, posing with some of her eighth-grade math students at Clio Elementary Middle School this past spring, to pursue a career in education.

TEACHING

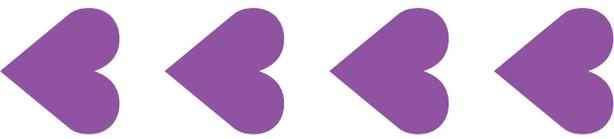
FROM

THE

HEART

WANTED: College seniors and recent graduates with proven leadership skills and a desire to make a difference in the lives of South Carolina's children

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MILTON MORRIS



When Greenville native Josh Bell graduated from Clemson University in 2008, he had no shortage of career options. The former student body president considered going to law school, and he was being wooed by corporate management programs. Then he heard about Teach for America.

Teach for America (TFA) is a national nonprofit organization that recruits young leaders to serve as classroom teachers in school systems seeking to improve the education opportunities for all students. Intrigued by the TFA mission, Bell applied and made the cut. After an intensive summer training program, he found himself in front of a seventh-grade classroom introducing himself as Mr. Bell, the new language arts teacher.

"Although I never thought of teaching before, this really is a social justice issue, and I didn't want to look back in 30 years and regret not being a part of something that I think our country will remember as a pretty important movement—making sure that all kids get a great education," Bell says of his decision to join TFA. "It's undeniable that educational opportunity can open doors like nothing else can."



TFA

JOSH BELL
"It's undeniable that educational opportunity can open doors like nothing else can."

Assigned to a Charlotte middle school, Bell's job was to help close the achievement gap, get students reading and writing at (or above) grade level, and inspire them to pursue academic excellence. He and another TFA corps member worked alongside their fellow teachers, creating new academic programs, setting high standards for students and encouraging a passion for learning among kids who often faced the burden of low expectations.

Soon the students were "on a mission for their own academic success," Bell says. "Once that momentum got going, students pushed us. I had students who would call me on Sunday night and ask me about the lesson plan for the coming week."

Today, Bell is the executive director of the South Carolina region of TFA, working to bring similar results to schools across the Palmetto



“We don’t do it because it’s easy, but because it’s challenging.”

Annie Ciechanowski

Clio Elementary Middle School

TEACHER PROFILE

As Annie Ciechanowski sees it, tackling Teach for America’s goal to transform education is not unlike embracing President Kennedy’s vision of putting an American on the moon.

“We don’t do it because it’s easy, but because it’s challenging,” the petite, 27-year-old teacher says.

After one year of teaching math at Clio Elementary Middle School in Marlboro County, Ciechanowski is having exactly the kind of personal impact that attracted her to TFA. In August 2012, Ciechanowski’s seventh graders were counting on their fingers for basic math. By spring, that class had achieved 90 percent mastery of multiplication and division.

Last fall, one of her eighth graders was working at a second-grade level; by year’s end, his skills rose to sixth-grade level—“still behind,” she concedes, “but to see him do well and take pride in that, that’s been amazing.”

A year ago, when she asked her students to tell her what colleges they hoped to attend, she got “push back”: not everyone can go to college, they told her. A few months later, each one could list four or five schools they aspired to—maybe a four-year college, maybe vocational or technical school—each a possible avenue to their personal goals.

A native Midwesterner, Ciechanowski was working in Miami for a defense contractor, tracking the impact of economic factors on drug trafficking, when she decided TFA was a way she could come out from behind a computer and help build stronger communities.

At just 5 feet 1 inch tall, Ciechanowski lacks an obvious physical authority over her taller adolescent students, but she confidently maintains classroom order in a firm voice, applauding positive behaviors (“I love how this group is discussing the problem; I hear really good questions”) and managing dissenters (“It’s okay to not like it; you still have to do it”).

Ciechanowski is now committed to a future in education—a graduate degree in education policy or advanced teaching, possibly. “I’m trying to figure out where I can make the biggest impact,” she says.

For now, that’s Clio. Ciechanowski is the first math teacher to complete a full year at her school in the past five years.

“It was good to be able to come in and tell the students that not only will I be here all year, I’ll be here next year, too,” she says. —DIANE VETO PARHAM

2011

The year TFA began working with S.C. school systems

10

Number of partner school districts in South Carolina during the 2012–13 school year

49

Number of schools with TFA corps members in the classroom during the 2012–13 school year

200+

Number of TFA corps members scheduled to teach in S.C. during the 2013–14 school year

8,000+

Estimated number of S.C. students who will be reached by TFA corps members during the 2013–14 school year

85

Number of TFA alumni working in education in South Carolina

State. Since 2011, the group has placed more than 100 young teachers in partner schools in Orangeburg, Charleston, Florence, Clarendon, Darlington and Marlboro counties (see teacher profiles with this story), and in the coming academic year, TFA expects to have 200 motivated corps members in South Carolina schools.

Bell describes his organization as a “human capital pipeline,” helping schools find energetic teachers who commit to a minimum of two years in the classroom but who also seek to make their mark on education for the long term. Nationally, two-thirds of TFA corps members stay involved with education either as teachers or by doing the policy work and administrative tasks necessary to help strengthen school systems outside the classroom. Many others use the skills and experience of being a TFA corps member to succeed in a variety of other private-sector and public-service careers.

The next application period to join TFA opens this month (see “How to get involved,” p. 20), and while applicants may request placement in any of the more than 36 states served by the organization, Bell’s goal is to recruit South Carolinians to work right here at home, closing the achievement gap for Palmetto State students. ▶▶

GEORGIA



Justin Dunham

Darlington Middle School

Justin Dunham's Earth science class is studying the phases of the moon. But watching the 24-year-old teacher work is like an extra lesson in kinetic energy.

TEACHER PROFILE

Evidence of his stepping days with his college fraternity can be seen in the bounce in his walk, the fluid movements of his body, the rhythm in his speech. While he teaches, he moves. As he moves, his Darlington Middle School students watch. And listen.

"I'm sure a lot of them haven't had a 6-foot-1 black male with dreads teaching them," he says of his hold on their attention.

Not so long ago, Dunham remembers, he was much like his students. He grew up in nearby Florence. He played basketball, was in the school band, worked after school at Pizza Hut. After his father died when Dunham was 9, his mother kept a firm hand on Dunham and his older brother, immersing them in books, church and strong morals.

"She was a buffer between me and my environment," Dunham says.

Dunham was studying exercise science and psychology at the University of South Carolina when he heard South Carolina TFA executive director Josh Bell speak about the organization's mission. Already passionate about community service, Dunham decided on the spot to apply. He requested placement near his hometown, where he could be that same kind of buffer and inspiration for his middle schoolers.

In interactive lessons, Dunham challenges his single-gender classes to reason through the information so they can explain not just what they know, but why it's so. He strides through a class of boys, quizzing them on tides and eclipses, tossing a small plastic football at each student whose turn it is to answer. They toss the ball back with their responses; if they hesitate, he helps them think it through.

"Y'all got that, y'all got that," he says encouragingly. "Tell me why you're right, man."

As they work at their desks, he plays a song he pulled from the Internet about the moon's phases, with lyrics set to Cee Lo Green's "Forget You": "I see it hanging all around, in the sky above, and I'm like, the moon, oo, oo, oo." He feeds them acronyms and images to use as memory devices while they learn the material they must know for upcoming standardized tests.

But he's also focused on their future beyond the classroom. Test scores are important, he says, but so are developing good behavior and setting goals. Whether his students are aiming for college, the military or professional sports, Dunham wants them to cultivate the skills to get there.

"I know why I get up every morning at 5:15—because I have 142 students who are waiting for me," Dunham says. "By the time I leave at 5:30 that afternoon, I know what I've done has touched somebody and helped somebody to success." —DIANE VETO PARHAM

"By the time I leave at 5:30 that afternoon, I know what I've done has touched somebody and helped somebody to success."



“I just felt like I personally needed to be here. That was my motivation.”

Naajaya Leak

Excel Academy, Morningside Elementary

TEACHER PROFILE

Naajaya Leak’s fourth-period class files into the classroom all giggles and motion, and from the moment the 11- and 12-year-old girls step through the door, Leak is primed and ready to channel that energy into sixth-grade math.

A first-year TFA teacher at Excel Academy, the “girls’ side” of Morningside Elementary in North Charleston, Leak handles the kids with the authority one would expect from a seasoned classroom teacher and the accessible poise of a young woman who could very well be an older sister to her students.

Today’s classroom exercises include just that—exercise. Working in teams of two, the girls tackle a worksheet of math problems based on how many times they can hop or perform jumping jacks to snippets of popular music. As the students take turns performing the exercises and recording the data, Leak prowls the room, joining in right alongside her students, playfully critiquing their jumping skills (“That’s not a hop. *This* is a hop!”). When the girls take their seats and begin quietly working the equations, Leak makes the rounds again, offering encouragement and constructive tips for thinking through solutions.

“When kids get up and they’re moving, they are less focused on the fact that they are actually doing work,” Leak explains after the students are dismissed for the day. “They’re using energy to do math, and that’s what they remember. They remember the things they got up and did.”

These students also happen to be Leak’s homeroom class, so the girls begin and end their day with the 23-year-old teacher, who never misses an opportunity to coach, encourage and lead by example.

“Much of my teaching is based on the relationship I have with my students,” Leak says. “I try to show them, as a young woman, this is how I behave.”

Like many TFA corps members, Leak never thought she’d become a classroom teacher. A native of Winston-Salem, N.C., she majored in public health at the University of North Carolina–Charlotte and demonstrated the leadership skills TFA looks for by volunteering with health education programs and serving as a resident assistant in her dorm. When her residence hall supervisor told her about TFA, the opportunity to have an impact on the next generation just clicked.

“I’ve been through a lot in my life. I’ve learned a lot, I’ve seen a lot, I’ve done a lot, so I thought it would be a great opportunity to be able to share my experience,” she says. “I just felt like I personally needed to be here. That was my motivation. I felt there was no better person to come in and talk to these kids than me.” —KEITH PHILLIPS

This fall, TFA recruiters will hit the state’s college campuses, spreading the word about the program and looking for seniors with the right combination of heart, idealism, critical thinking skills and leadership abilities. Those accepted into the program (nationally just 6,000 people were selected from last year’s pool of 57,000 applicants) will receive intensive training and work with mentors to become, as Bell says, “the leader that a classroom full of students deserves.”

To potential TFA applicants, Bell asks this simple question to gauge their motivation: “Is our country living up to its fullest potential, and if it’s not, what role do you play in making that happen?” ☺

GetMore

How to get involved

TEACH: Apply to join the teaching corps at teachforamerica.org/application.

DONATE: Make a tax-deductible donation at teachforamerica.org/donate.

PARTNER: Contact Charles McDonald at charles.mcdonald@teachforamerica.org to learn more about bringing Teach for America to your school or community.

ENGAGE: Connect with Teach for America S.C. on Facebook or Twitter (@TFA_SC) to get the latest updates.