



## Courage in the Classroom

MN Teacher of the Year, Kelly Holstine, is used to standing out, but she's more interested in *standing up* for her students.

Self-paced courses and self-expression. Bean bags chairs and blankets. Lamps in lieu of overhead lights. "Not yet's" instead of Ds and Fs. Kelly Holstine has been instrumental in creating a learning environment that's breaking down norms—and breaking through to her students. "Every heart matters," a philosophy she lives and leads by, and one that has helped her gain recognition as the 2018 Minnesota Teacher of the Year.

As an English teacher and founding member of the Tokata Learning Center, an alternative school in the Shakopee district, she's made it her mission to create more space for mental health and authentic interactions. She's doing the work to ensure her students know that they are seen and valued and that means bringing more of herself to her classroom.

"There's this weird educational norm that you're not supposed to let your kids see you and you're not supposed to talk about your opinions," Holstine said. "And I don't agree with that. I think you should tell them how you feel about things as long as everyone else's opinion in that room matters, then you should also matter."

Holstine is the first known LGBTQ teacher to be given this honor in the state—but that piece of her identity almost kept her from her calling. "I don't know any other non gender-conforming teachers and at first, I didn't become a teacher because I thought it wouldn't work out for me to be an out lesbian teacher. I had to wait until I had enough self-confidence to do that."

She struggled with her own self-esteem growing up as a tomboy in a small town and has faced her share of homophobic experiences teaching in prior school districts. With more than 20 years of therapy, 25 years working with youth and a career trajectory that includes being a journalist and a social worker, she adds layers of context and experience to the way she approaches teaching her students and applies the tools she's developed to take care of herself.

"I believe in vulnerability and being our authentic selves," Holstine said. "We all need to own our shit. Being the best versions of ourselves benefits us, but it also benefits the kids so our stuff doesn't come out sideways on them. I can't teach them how to figure out what makes them happy and find their superpowers if I haven't done that same work."

SAFE SPACE ADVOCATE BREAKING norms SEE OTHERS & BE SEEN Teacher OF THE Year

### Creating a Safe Space

Transitioning from a traditional high school setting to an area learning center (ALC) was uncomfortable at first but became a pivotal moment. She reflects: "I love this school. It's changed me as a human."

Holstine spent the summer of 2012 creating Tokata with a small group of colleagues, a process that involved everything from furnishing the rooms to identifying the mission and developing the curriculum. On the outside, you'd overlook it for another storefront in a Shakopee, MN, strip mall. But on the inside, it's a second home, a safe space for around 100 students who apply to earn their diploma there when they aren't successful in a mainstream school system.

Each student comes with unique life experiences and challenges they're facing—trauma, social anxiety, chemical dependency, abandonment, etc.—and Tokata offers an alternative learning structure with smaller class sizes that allow teachers to have more patience and compassion to better meet the needs of their students.

"The self-esteem issue is huge," Holstine said. "So many kids have low self-esteem that end up at ALCs because they've failed classes and were expelled. They were told they'd never amount to anything."

Now in its seventh year, Tokata has a waiting list roughly half the size of its enrollment and Holstine says she regularly hears from alumni who've found the learning experience to be "life-changing."

"Watching their growth from the first day they arrive to when they graduate is amazing! And I feel like that's because we can see more of their insides on the outside. And what an honor and a privilege to see that. It's not necessarily that they are different human beings, it's just that they are more themselves."

### Writing Something New

When Tokata lost the funding for an on-site social worker three years ago, Holstine advocated to start a writing workshop class. "My hope was to fill the social-emotional gap – a place where they are comfortable talking about their feelings. When students reach out to me and tell me they're going through something hard, I'm like, 'Are you writing about it?'"

This is how she spends the fourth and final hour of the day, creating with 15 students from the comfort of a classroom that looks more like a living room. She joins the students in a writing prompt around a bean bag hearth for a session that showcases the raw talent and brilliance of her students and the tight-knit bond



## Important Life Lessons

### We Learned From Ms. Holstine

- You're never alone when you have a notebook.
- It should be safe to have flaws. Don't be afraid to be imperfect.
- Don't forget to breathe through the chaos.
- Own your shit—or it will come out sideways.

this group has formed. They even maintain a group text together so when students are dealing with issues or struggling, they have continuous support.

"Some of them could be professional writers and they didn't know it," Holstine said. "I've had students come in and I start to see some of the writing and they say, 'You are the first person who has told me that my writing is good.' And then they just keep going and keep growing and it's exceptional."

Through the class, students get the chance to be published in Tokata Tower, the bi-monthly online literary magazine she launched. She recently wrote and received a grant through the Shakopee Education Endowment Foundation to work with the arts and education nonprofit COMPAS and hire an artist to lead sessions and emcee the annual cabaret she helps put on for the students.

### Work in Progress

Her recognition has positioned her with an even larger platform to advocate for education equity and at-risk students. One that has put her in the running for the National Teacher of the Year, a program that

will bring her to the White House to meet with the administration next spring.

"We still have a long way to come to close the opportunity gap in our country, and in our state," Holstine said. According to the 2016 US Department of Education, Minnesota has one of the lowest graduation rates for students of color—and race is only part of this complex narrative that includes class, sexual orientation and mental health. Holstine continues to push herself to grow and does so on the basis of doing what's best for her students. But as her impact strengthens, so does her desire to do more and empower others to do the same.

"I can't be their only advocate. I can take a lot of the blows so they don't have to, but people need to know how important allies are, to know that they can talk about who they are, that they will be accepted as their true selves."

Holstine lives in St. Paul with her wife, Emma, an artist, and their band of rescue animals. She is humbled to be named the MN Teacher of the Year and to join the company of more than 86,000 teachers making a difference across the state.

STAND UP *for* STUDENTS OWN YOUR S\*#T VOICE & CHOICE original CREATIVE



It can be hard to find a well-fitted suit as a female, so Holstine designed one for herself at Milbern Clothing, right down to the orange stitching.



The wMN Breaking Barriers photo series stemmed from a desire to showcase women and companies who are breaking barriers, making a difference, and paving the way for women to come. Know of a female-identifying woman (or women) breaking barriers in their industry? We'd love to chat. Reach out to with a little background information and you just might see them featured in an upcoming issue! Email us at: [wmn.breaking.barriers@gmail.com](mailto:wmn.breaking.barriers@gmail.com)