CLASSROOM CHRONICLES

NATIONALLY NAMED

How Two Louisiana Educators Were Recently Surprised with a Milken Educator Award

DEPARTMENT of EDUCATION
Louisiana Believes

The Milken Educator Awards were established in 1987 by Lowell Milken to recognize the importance of exceptional teachers and to promote the profession of education. The national awards honor professionals in the field of education that truly embody their work. Recipients–elementary and secondary school teachers, principals, and specialists–are awarded an unrestricted check for $25,000 during surprise ceremonies. To date, more than 2,800 educators nationwide have been honored, and up to 40 more will earn the distinction in the coming year.

Louisiana educators **Steven Gamache, eighth-grade ELA teacher and instructional coach at Paul Habans Charter Schools in Orleans Parish,** and **Jennifer Williams, sixth-grade English teacher at John Q. Adams Middle School in Jefferson Parish** are among the most recent recipients. Gamache and Adams received the surprise of a lifetime in November 2019 when Milken, accompanied by State Superintendent John White, presented each of them with a Milken Educator Award in separate ceremonies on the same day. The two each thought they were attending assemblies to celebrate their schools' academic gains.

Both educators have not only impacted the lives of their students, but have made a mark in the world of education through their tireless efforts and dedication to the profession. As the ceremonies came to a close and students made their way back to class, Gamache and Williams sat down with us to share their initial thoughts on receiving such an award and provided insight into their daily efforts and commitment to the profession of education.

STEVEN GAMACHE

PAUL HABANS CHARTER SCHOOL

As an eighth-grade English teacher, Gamache pushes his students to exceed expectations. He is committed to increasing academic gains for all students, and elicits growth through analyzing student achievement data to individualize his lessons.

"No student is the same and no two students learn the same," said Gamache. "As a teacher, I never teach the same lesson twice. It is my job to get to know each of my students, their strengths and their weaknesses, so that I can teach them in a way that works best for them."

Last year, Paul Habans Charter School had the highest academic growth of any open enrollment elementary school in New Orleans, and Gamache's highly effective instructional practices played a role in this noted improvement.

> **"THE FIRST STEP TOWARD ENSURING SUCCESS IN THE CLASSROOM IS DEVELOPING A CONNECTION WITH STUDENTS."**

Gamache remembers how hard middle school can be and focuses on educating and connecting with his students on a human level first. "Having empathy for my students, having a sense of humor and not taking myself too seriously, is critical in the classroom," said Gamache. "If I want to be a quality teacher, I have to connect with my students as people first. I want them to see that I care about them and I support them. Once they know that and really believe it, they realize they are capable of just about anything."

To Gamache, teaching is not just a profession, but an opportunity to connect with his students on a deeper level. He developed a passion for English from an early age and carries that passion into the classroom in a seemingly contagious manner.

"I love reading and talking about books," he said. "Middle schoolers, in particular, are such an enthusiastic group. It brings me joy and makes me happy to be able to talk about books with them. As an educator, that is the biggest reward and motivating factor."

Watch Gamache receive the surprise of a lifetime and learn more about him.

JENNIFER WILLIAMS

JOHN Q. ADAMS MIDDLE SCHOOL, JEFFERSON PARISH

As a sixth-grade English teacher, Williams uses creativity to speak to her students. Her classroom–adorned with brightly colored walls depicting what her students have learned and what they will learn–is a feast for the eyes, fully-equipped with a constellation ceiling.

"When my students walk into my classroom, I want them to feel comfortable," said Williams. "I want them to know they belong here. I believe this has a direct impact on student achievement."

Williams' classroom includes designated areas for student-centered work and collaboration. Her creativity spills over into her lessons, as she finds unique ways to increase student engagement.

She created "Flashlight Fridays," a favorite among her students, where her class reads and works together by flashlight. Establishing this safe and inviting environment equips her students with the comfort and confidence to think outside of the box and take academic risks.

"As an educator, it is my job to push my students academically," said Williams. "I find creative ways to teach lessons, showing them that they can learn without borders and inspiring them to reach for the stars."

She also ensures she connects with them on a personal level. "My students know that at times I can be upset with them, but they never forget that I still love them."

Similarly, Williams is known for supporting her colleagues. She leads weekly professional development meetings and is the first to volunteer when assistance is needed.

Watch Williams receive the surprise of a lifetime and learn more about her.

During the ceremonies, Milken emphasized that being presented with this one-time award is just the beginning. Milken Educators are given access to powerful networking and development tools throughout their careers in education. In addition to participation in the Milken Educator Network, this year's recipients will attend a Milken Educator Forum, where they will network with their new colleagues and exchange ideas with state and federal leaders on the future of education.

For Milken, these awards are about bringing attention to classroom heroes, serving as validation, motivation, and inspiration to current and future quality educators with the hopes of sending a specific message: We recognize you. We value you. We thank you.

Learn more about the Milken Educator Awards.