

TEACHER FEATURE: FIFTH GRADE TEACHER SHEA LEVIN

Shea Levin, already garnering a reputation for his humor among his 5th grade students, is new to Clinton but not to teaching. The Brooklyn native has a Master's degree in education from Brooklyn College, and has taught for seven years, the past two at a Yeshiva middle school in Piscataway. He currently lives in Passaic. We asked him a few questions:



Where were you before coming to Clinton? This is my seventh year teaching. The past two years I was teaching at a Yeshiva called Shaarei Tzion. I was teaching 6th, 7th, and 8th grade math and 8th grade science.

Why did you decide to come to a public school? It always was my goal to teach in a public school because there's so much learning going on. I'm very into making myself a better person. There are so many experienced people to learn from here.

Why did you decide to become a teacher? The summers off! We used to go to the beach a lot, and I wanted a job where I could continue to spend my summers at the beach. But seriously, I always like furthering my education, and teaching is a field in which you are always learning.

What is your favorite part of teaching? When students feel good about themselves and can do something that they had trouble with in the past, and I see them glow with pride, I realize that I made a difference, I helped them. Also, in education, you end up working on your character tremendously. You're forced to deal with many different people and you learn how to relate to people. It has changed my life, the way I interact with people, the way I speak to my own kids. It teaches you how to be a really nice person.

Who has had the biggest influence on your life? My mother. She is always helping people whenever she gets a chance, putting herself last and putting everyone else first. Growing up there was a big emphasis on being a good person and doing the right thing.

What motivates you to teach? I really enjoy doing what I do. It's exciting for me. I sit for hours and prepare lessons and think about how I'm going to teach them.

How do you motivate the kids? I try to be very funny in the class, very understanding, and I try to relate to the kids. I motivate them by complimenting them. Motivation comes from succeeding. If you're succeeding, you're motivated to do more.

What's the biggest challenge you face as a teacher? You have 22 students in the classroom with different personalities, and it's challenging trying to work with all of them, to reach every student, and to make every student succeed in the classroom.

Is there anything about your work here at Clinton that has been particularly rewarding or challenging compared to other schools you have worked at? The teachers I'm with now know so much and Ms. O'Neill has been phenomenally supportive. I've learned so much from her. It's nice to have people you can learn from.

Are there any interesting projects you're working on? Something I started this year that has been interesting is called *past practice*. It's a continuous review of whatever we've learned from the beginning of the year. When you learn something, it's clear the first time, but over time you forget it or realize you don't fully understand it. The point is to continuously come back to it, so you have a conceptual understanding of it, and you see it in different ways. We do 10 to 15 minutes of math *past practice* a day. The kids like it, and it has been a tremendous success in terms of them feeling like they really know it, and when you know something, you feel good about it.

Have kids asked you why you wear a yarmulke on your head and what have you told them? At first, one student asked me why I wear a cap on my head, but there are many Jewish kids in the class that know it means that you're Jewish. It has just become part of my dress, and no one notices it. Yarmulke comes from the words "fear of heaven." In Judaism, it's a humbling gesture, to show that there is someone above us. Also, I don't shake women's hands. In the Orthodox community, men shake men's hands and women shake women's hands; it's a barrier against any wrong.

Have you ever done stand-up comedy? Only at Jewish weddings!

What do you do in your free time? At this point, I'm spending time with my family. I have four kids. I also study Jewish Law, which is a lifelong pursuit.

No summers at the beach? Not since I've been married. And these days, teachers work summers anyway.

—Laurie Tarkan