

SPOTLIGHT ON: 3RD GRADE TEACHER STEFANIE IZZOLINO

When Stefanie Izzolino started teaching at Clinton, it was like coming home, not just to the town she grew up in, but making a full circle to a profession she grew up with. Her mother taught for 20 years in Newark, so Ms. Izzolino knew she'd always follow in her footsteps, but she had a few detours.

When did you decide to become a teacher? I always knew it was what I wanted to do, but I resisted it for a while, probably because my mom was a teacher and I wanted to set my own course in life. My degree was in journalism, I started doing public relations after college and was waitressing, but I never saw myself doing either of those things forever. So after a few years, I decided to go back to school to get my teaching certificate.

So it sounds like your mother was a big influence on you? Teaching has always been a part of my life. Now that I teach, all my mom and I talk about is teaching. But my dad was a big influence too. He was a fencing coach and got me into the sport. I competed at Columbia high school and went to Temple University on a full fencing scholarship. I was runner up for the All American team. I travelled all over the country, which was an amazing experience.

Where were you before coming to Clinton? I was teaching third grade in North Brunswick. I loved my job, but the commute was really far. I was born and raised in Maplewood and I love teaching in town. I feel like I'm home. I'm really invested here. And I *do* like running into kids in town.

Sounds like you really enjoy the kids? I love the kids. I think about them when I'm home. I laugh a lot and learn a lot from them. One child, Lucia, taught me how to knit and I'm completely addicted to it now. You develop these relationships with them, and by the middle of the year, you feel really appreciated. I also love that it's a social job, I'm active, and the days fly by.

What is your favorite subject to teach? I love teaching math. That's my strongest subject. I'm very Type A and I like structure, beginning somewhere and coming up with an answer. In my last job I worked with a math specialist who was amazing—her enthusiasm, the way she engaged the kids—and I try to model my teaching after her. I also just finished my Masters in math education in January. The coursework gave me a better understanding of who I am as a teacher, as it required a lot of self-assessment. I also learned a lot about the Singapore math program, which we are adopting in the district.

How do you make the kids like math? I love the manipulatives for hands-on learning. The kids go bananas for them. They can visualize concepts better and they like math better when they understand it. I've also been giving



the students more project-based homework to give them an opportunity to be creative, which is not easy with math. I've had them create board games using math problems. The students loved making them, and it was really cool for them to play the games they created.

If you had \$1000 to spend in the classroom, what would you get?

I should say technology, but I really would want manipulatives. I want everything out there. I'm a scavenger whenever teachers get rid of things.

What do you do when you're not teaching?

My fiancé and I watch a lot of movies, especially foreign films.

Any favorites? I love so many movies, but I'd have to say I love *Y Tu Mama Tambien*, *The Royal Tenenbaums*, and anything by Woody Allen. We also go to hear a lot of live music. My fiancé, Stephane Wrembel—he's Stephane, I'm Stefanie—is a musician, playing jazz guitar and world music, so I always go to his shows. He composed the main score for Woody Allen's film *Midnight in Paris*. Stephane is French, so I understand the language completely, but haven't been brave enough to speak it yet.

I heard you went on a trip to Europe with Ms. Leach last summer? Yes, we worked for The People to People Ambassador Program, and went to Greece, Italy, and France, which was great. My fiancé and I also go to France pretty often to visit his family.

What was your all time favorite class trip? Going to see the Disney nature movies. I'm a movie person.

A question from my kids: Do the kids call you Mizzolino? Yes, all the time.

—Laurie Tarkan