

Giselle Schooler

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Extra Mile Award

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Ode to Ms. Shelby Jones

There are few joys comparable to that of walking into Ms. Shelby Jones' classroom. First of all, you're met by a wall of bright artwork from her years of teaching, each piece serving as the home for a quote from a book or poem or play that a student found interesting or important. I have probably accumulated hours of staring down that wall, soaking up as much inspiration as I possibly could. I find a small sense of satisfaction in that on the first day of eighth grade, it was that wall that gave me hope: for that class, for the whole year, all of it. Now my artwork hangs among the other pieces, full circle. In her class, I quickly found there was more to Ms. Jones than her wall. Now I know her as a teacher who consistently goes the extra mile in all possible ways.

I, like most other middle schoolers, don't love large workloads, but as I found myself completing tasks for Ms. Jones' class, however grudgingly at first (I'm looking at you, summer reading), I began to notice I was truly enjoying myself, throwing myself into her assignments with more vigor than I had for any other class I'd ever taken. The amount of energy Ms. Jones puts in to instill a love of learning in her students is part of how she goes the extra mile. One of my favourite examples is after we read *The Illustrated Man* by Ray Bradbury, she allowed me to apply some serious creative licence on what "art project" was defined as, and encouraged me in my desire to design, pattern, and sew a ballgown representing all of the book's short stories. With every assignment she gives, she offers opportunities for students to try something new and

outside of their comfort zones. Ms. Jones is the best person I know to challenge me. Because of the heightened caliber of work she expects from her students, I feel I have grown more this year than I have in any other.

Ms. Jones also pulls off her effective mix of accommodating and pushing her students to love learning by offering her Gifted Book Club—which has served as the model for all of the other 8th grade teams—in place of Renfroe’s Accelerated Reader programme. For all of my years in middle school, I have detested AR because I have felt it was a flawed system that rewarded the wrong things. Not surprisingly, Ms. Jones understands this, and has taken the extra time and effort to create a miracle solution, that she gives up her lunch hours to offer us. Because of her Gifted Book Club, I have read *Perks of Being a Wallflower*, *Catcher in the Rye*, and *The Secret Life of Bees*, all books I now consider to be among my all time favourites. Her book club has also taught me how to discuss these books by developing discussion questions and having conversations with others about what we have read. The skill to develop discussion questions, which I wouldn’t have learned or been able to practice had it not been for Ms. Jones’ extra efforts, has made me a strong interviewer. Beyond that, Ms. Jones has gone the extra mile by providing tutoring, chaperoning DHS’ annual Southern Interscholastic Press Association trip, and arming her students with valuable skills for their professional lives (as well as what the standards dictate), not because she’s required to, but because she wants what’s best for us.

That’s my working theory, at least. Ms. Jones is like a guardian angel to me and I’m sure much of the eighth grade. There hasn’t been a day that’s gone by where I look even remotely sad that she hasn’t noticed, dropped everything, and done all she could to help me. We’ve all been through middle school. We all know it is a grueling three years, from tests, to assignments, to

friendships (or lack thereof). It is very easy to feel completely and totally overwhelmed; I feel so constantly. But Ms. Jones, through her humorous stories, comforting nature, empathy, and talent for warding away *ennui* better than any human has the right to, has made this stretch of middle school flow. When I walk into Renfroe at 8:39, tired, hungry, and burning with the desperate desire to return home and away from whatever horrors await me, I can breathe easier knowing fifty minutes that day will be spent with Ms. Jones.

I will never have the words to adequately summarize all Ms. Jones has done for me, but I assure you, it is marathons upon marathons of extra work to benefit students like me. The greater tragedy than that, I think, is that I will never be able to truly express how grateful I am to Ms. Jones. She has changed me forever. Because of her, I am closer to the person I strive to be. For that, I can only say thank you, Ms. Jones. With all of my heart, thank you.