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AUHSD's Teacher of the Year

By Diane Claytor



Katherine Walton, Acalanes High School Photo
Diane Claytor

Katherine Walton loves her job. That's apparent the minute the Acalanes High School teacher starts talking about it. As both a special education teacher and leadership advisor, Walton proclaims that she has her dream job. "It's the perfect blend for me. I get to teach special ed, which I dearly love and where my heart is," she said, "but I also love student activities and the culture they create on campus. And I get to do them both!"

This year, Walton, after only five years at Acalanes, received quite an honor: she was named the Acalanes Union High School District Teacher of the Year. She is one of only 22 TOYs in Contra Costa County - and that's out of approximately 8,400 teachers educating our children in the county's public schools.

"I'm super humbled," Walton stated. "It really goes back to the staff I work with. No award nor work is done in isolation. For me, with both my roles, I really depend on my peers and I'm lucky to have colleagues that have allowed me to learn from them, depend on them and grow with them."

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Born and raised in Southern California with a mother who was a special education teacher, Walton was convinced she didn't want to follow that same path. She got her undergraduate degree in political science and a master's degree in higher administration. But while undergoing a medical treatment, she "suddenly had a revelation of what I wanted to do with my life." Admitting that she wasn't interested in going back to school and wanting to experience life somewhere different, Walton was accepted to Oakland Teaching Fellows, a program that recruits, selects and trains college graduates and working professionals to become educators.

"Moving to Oakland is probably the best choice I've made - besides my husband," Walton said with a twinkle in her eye. She was able to get her credential while teaching special ed at Oakland's Castlemont High School and proudly said she was fortunate to work with an amazing staff that supported and mentored her.

Admitting that "I'm never complacent with where I am and always want to build and grow and become better," Walton moved to Acalanes to gain a different experience and learn even more.

Obviously it was the right decision.

In her primary role as the special ed teacher, Walton works with students who have mild to moderate disabilities, offering additional support to help them succeed in their general ed classes. Working with these kids one or two periods a day, she designs a curriculum that addresses their specific needs, such as reading, writing or organization skills. "I'm also in constant communication with their general ed teachers to make sure the students are doing well or determine if they need extra help." She typically has these students all four years. "That's one of my favorite parts of this program," noted Walton, who's pregnant with her first child. "I get to see them come in as freshmen, work with them, watch them develop and grow and then cheer them on as they graduate."

As the leadership advisor, Walton also works with all four grade levels, which she believes provides the students with a great opportunity to know others they wouldn't necessarily get to meet. "Kids have often told me that one of the best parts of leadership is that they're able to create relationships across grade levels," she stated.

Leadership, with student government at its core, is the group that provides most of the extra curricular activities on campus, including school dances, lunchtime activities and freshman orientation. But it's so much more, Walton emphasized. "For me, it's all about developing the skills the kids will need after high school - skills like organization, communication, working with a team. As I tell my students, 'I want you to walk out in June having stronger leadership skills than you had when you entered in August.'"

With 45 students in each of her two leadership classes, Walton is definitely busy. But she firmly believes that "if a student wants to be a part of something, wants to find a way to serve their community, it's important for me to help them accomplish that."

"Katherine is by far the hardest working teacher on campus," exclaimed Marissa Meadows, Acalanes' Academic Counselor. "She has a crazy amount of energy ... she never seems overwhelmed and is always

willing to add something else to her plate. She is one of those people who can do all the things and do them well." Noting that Walton "gives 150 percent everyday," and calling her "the energizer bunny in human form," Meadows exclaimed unequivocally that Walton "absolutely" deserved to be selected AUHSD's Teacher of the Year.

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