

Published April 27th, 2022

MSD Teacher of the Year Serina Culleton

By Lou Fancher



Serina Culleton Photo provided

In the oddest of ways, instructing elementary school students during the pandemic has suited Rheem Elementary School third grade teacher Serina Culleton perfectly. She loves teaching outdoors, centering lessons within games and observations of nature, springing dexterously from hands-on to virtual to hybrid formats, and most of all, never sugar-coating or sending obscure messages to her students.

A teacher at Rheem for 20 years, Culleton was recently announced as Teacher of the Year for the Moraga School District. "The way they told me was so sweet. The new superintendent (Dr. Julie Parks) came into our classroom with our principal, Brian Sullivan, and a giant balloon. They announced it to all of the students; to all of us at once. All the kids thought it was so cool. After the announcement, they took a picture with all of us together."

Culleton said it was such an honor "because we have so many strong teachers in our district. I was simply shocked. What's interesting is that my kids and my niece and nephew have gone through Rheem now and I've seen the teachers here in a different light. I've been so impressed. I saw a different side of them, especially during COVID."

Culleton and her husband, Tim Culleton, have two sons, ages 10 and 13. Her mother is Susan Sperry, who taught for 37 years in a variety of positions at Los Perales Elementary and Joaquin Moraga Middle School in the Moraga School District. Like her mother, Culleton's path to leading a classroom of young students followed a few twists and side journeys before reaching its destination.

After attending Campolindo High School, Culleton earned a degree in psychology at UC Berkeley. "I always enjoyed performing, being an extrovert. I like being around the energy of people, especially kids. I thought I might do something with education and business. But I wasn't motivated by profit and loss: it was people I enjoyed. Over time, I realized psychology would be draining. I'm like a sponge for other people's emotions so it's hard for me to let go of how other people are feeling."

Fascination with the psychology involved in teaching and a strong interest in understanding kids motivated Culleton to return to school; eventually earning teaching credentials and a master's in interpersonal communication from Saint Mary's College in Moraga. "At Saint Mary's I learned my strength is working with people; realistically seeing where they are coming from. I researched the connection students and teachers have and how that impacts their academic paths."

Even though Culleton's temperament and skill set primed her to handle what she says was the pandemic's repeated "go, go, go, stop, readjust" pattern, disrupted routines and procedures were tough. In the summertime between the last two school terms, she says she and her colleagues crashed. The anxiety of disjointed schedules and thinking about the next stage of returning to classrooms and removing masks created new dynamics that continued as soon as classes resumed.

"There were questions and feelings getting hurt when some kids still wore masks and some didn't. We've been thinking about how we'd keep kids safe, but also how to get along amid differences. We don't want our kids to be fractured in the way our country is. We're trying to nurse the ideal of being kind, even if you don't agree with each other. We're asking our students to do this, even if adults don't model the same kindness."

Asked if the pandemic, and parents having to become pseudo class assistants at home, has led to changed perceptions about the teaching profession, Culleton said, "For a lot of parents it was eye opening to see how hard it is to teach not only your own child, but to teach so many kids. They saw how challenging it is to teach."

Culleton nurtures new ways of thinking about and acting in her students' rapidly changing world, encourages questioning and supports the need for books and other materials with more diverse characters and authors. "It's all in the approach. Let's question, have discussions, not charge in with information saying this is the only way it is. In my classroom, when we do a section on the Missions in California, they're aware that the

native people weren't marching happily into the missions. They see the injustice. They think about right and wrong. They get upset about segregation before 1964 and we talk about why it was done and have a whole conversation around that.

"A few years ago a parent came in and talked about Chinese New Year and told us it's more often called Lunar New Year, a term I learned and use now," she added. "We have to look at more than one perspective. You can't know everything."

2022-23 Lamorinda Teacher of the Year Nominees:

- ? Sarah Frank, Acalanes Union High School District, Miramonte High School
- ? Claudia Windfuhr, Lafayette School District, Stanley Middle School
- ? Vanessa Olona, Lafayette School District, Lafayette Elementary School
- ? Cheri Facer, Lafayette School District, Happy Valley Elementary School
- ? Nancy Newcomb, Lafayette School District, Springhill Elementary School
- ? Cathy Bertics, Lafayette School District, Burton Valley Elementary School
- ? Serina Culleton, Moraga School District, Donald L. Rheem Elementary School

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA