

WHO SAYS YOU CAN'T GO HOME

Gateway Alumni Return To Give Back

(October 25, 2023) GEORGETOWN, TX — Katie Houle attended a large suburban middle school and immediately knew it wasn't a good fit. She navigated hallways with hundreds of other stressed students and had a hard time finding a friend group. Entering the ninth grade, a new kind of school had recently opened. Katie enrolled at Gateway College Preparatory School in 2010 and never looked back, graduating in 2014. Today, she is a second-year kindergarten teacher at the same school from which she left nine years ago.

“Teaching is the hardest job in the world,” said Ms. Houle. “Every day, every classroom, every year is different.” What makes the job easier for Katie, specifically at Gateway, are the parents. “We have more parental support than a traditional public school – parents want their kids here and the kids want to be here.”



In the smaller setting at Gateway Prep, ‘student’ Katie was able to develop close relationships with teachers, which helped her focus on the rigorous studies. In fact, Katie says one of the major benefits of the blended teaching style was the fact that it helped develop independence within her. As it turned out, that teaching system was similar to her college course process and it made university work easier than she expected.

Disney Vickers' family moved a couple of times around Central Texas, landing in Round Rock at the beginning of her high school career. With a recommendation from a fellow church member, her mother decided it was best to try a brand new, smaller school. Disney was a part of the first school year of Gateway Prep in 2009, when the school was located on Williams Drive, where the district offices now reside.

“When I first came to Gateway, I automatically felt like I belonged,” said Ms. Vickers, who is in her first year of teaching third grade at Gateway Prep. “Because it was so small, we all got along and we grew close like a family in those early days.”



Disney has several years under her belt as a third grade teacher in a traditional small town consolidated ISD. Even in a smaller city, she immediately noticed how much Gateway differed.

“There is a night and day difference in behavior issues from where I taught before,” said Ms. Vickers. “Parents are

committed to bringing their children to Gateway and kids know they are here to learn.”

As a student at Prep, Disney is ever grateful for teachers like Ms. Weir and Ms. Boggs who pushed her to achieve more. Planning to run for secretary of student council, she was encouraged instead, to run for president – Ms. Boggs knew Disney was the class leader and was the best choice. As president, she recalls the excitement of cutting the ribbon for the gymnasium and becoming the first class to hold graduation in the building. Years later, it was quite the shock to see the campus growth.

“When I came back to Gateway, I really could not believe how much it changed,” said Disney. “They actually have a cafeteria and *two* gyms!”

While outsiders may find early memories of Gateway odd, our teachers look back fondly at unique moments. Unusual things like jumping through cornfields at cross country practice. Or,

when the water went out, having to be bussed to a gas station to use the restroom. Yet occurrences like that helped build the character and culture of Gateway. And the effect on the academics of Prep is not lost on the alums.

“Because we were so small and new, we had opportunities to try everything – things we might not have done in the past and it made us more well-rounded,” said Ms. Vickers. As an example, Disney was the first president of the National Honor Society and Katie played on Gateway’s first softball team.

Ms. Houle and Ms. Vickers are not the only Gateway graduates working at Prep this year. Christian Padilla, a PLP educational aide, is a former Gateway Gator who graduated from Gateway Tech, the credit recovery sister school of Prep, in 2015. Christian attended Prep for three semesters before making the switch to Tech to catch up on credit hours. He could not have been happier about his experience, both as a student and a staff member.



“At my previous school, you are just a number; at Gateway, you get to know the teachers – they push you to be better,” said Mr. Padilla. “I stress to my students today that they are very lucky to be at Gateway.”

Following high school graduation, Christian followed his passion, playing baseball at Blackburn College in Illinois before transferring to Concordia. He coaches select baseball on the side, and while Christian stands shy of his degree, the experience at Gateway is making him think about a permanent career in education.

“I played for Coach Miller and he is still here at Gateway,” said Mr. Padilla. “In fact, Coach is a huge reason I am here now – he is a great teacher.”

Each of the Gateway alumni/staff members gave a similar answer when asked why they chose to return to Gateway to pursue their career – the climate, culture and family atmosphere. With a new generation of teachers developing from Gateway, students appear to be in good hands.

“I love teaching and it takes a certain heart,” said Ms. Houle. “Honestly, I was called to do it and it is my destiny.”

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About Orenda Education

Orenda Education is the sponsoring entity for Orenda Charter School District, an “open-enrollment charter school district.” Fueled by educators and parents passionate about school choice, Orenda Charter School District operates four Central Texas campuses serving 1,900 students, providing innovative instructional methods to help students reach their academic and human potential. For more information, visit orendaeducation.org.