

Briana Jackson - Fourth and Fifth Grade Language Arts

Fourth graders surround Briana Jackson, buzzing with excitement moments before they must become silent and still as figures in the Explorers' Wax Museum. Each has researched an explorer from the Golden Age of Exploration, written a research paper and composed a speech highlighting the explorer's discoveries. Now they become their explorers, striking poses dressed in period costumes. When visitors press a button, they spark to life to describe their exploits.



The wax museum is a time-honored fourth grade tradition, but Ms. Jackson uses her journalism and marketing background to introduce new twists. Students' explorer portfolios now include news stories ("Henry Hudson Abandoned by Crew in Hudson Bay!"), postcards from sailors to loved ones at home ("Captain Cook is sailing into the unknown!"), illustrations, ship designs and more. It is part of a cross-curricular project that weaves history with Mr. Park and language arts with Ms. Jackson into a memorable learning experience. "The students become experts," says Ms. Jackson. "They are so excited. It's wonderful."

Ms. Jackson's fifth grade students look forward to preparing for Exchange City, which allows students to take on the roles of business entrepreneurs and civic leaders working together in a miniature city complete with 14 businesses. Students learn how to apply for a job, write a resume, and prepare for and conduct themselves in a job interview. "I went as a fifth grader," says Ms. Jackson, "and it's fun to see my students experiencing what I did."

A new tradition in fifth grade is Ms. Jackson's Greek unit. Each student researches a Greek god or goddess, creates an exhibit and presents it to the class. The culmination is a fashion show featuring fifth graders as gods and goddesses walking the catwalk to commentary they've written. ("Hermes, the Greek messenger, is sporting a mailbag so he can deliver important messages to Zeus on Mt. Olympus.")

Ms. Jackson began working in Topeka Collegiate's Summer Adventures program at 17. She was hooked. "I always thought I would send my kids here one day but I never imagined I would be teaching here. Now I can't imagine doing anything else. I just love working with my students every single day. They have so much to teach me."

Ms. Jackson conducts Socratic seminars with her students, encouraging them to analyze literature, poetry and even songs. "I'll ask them what the writer was trying to portray, what the true meaning is," she explains. "They have wonderful insight and ideas. I teach them complicated concepts and they grasp and discuss them in a way that is more adult than you might expect. We should listen to them."

And listen she does. Briana Jackson remains close to her former students. They're eager to share and she's eager to hear about their academic successes. "These kids made me fall in love with teaching," she says. "It makes me so happy that my former students still allow and want me to have a part in their lives."

In addition to teaching fourth and fifth grade language arts, Briana Jackson is Director of After-School and Summer Adventures. She's come full circle, now directing the summer program where she began work as a teenager.