

MEA • voice

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'SPECIAL' PROGRAM

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Marine.

Officer.

Pilot.

Teacher.

Life of Service

Republicans Rush to Allow Guns in Schools

WE WOULD HAVE LIKED TO TALK WITH YOU AT THIS SPECIAL TIME OF YEAR ABOUT SOMETHING MORE UPLIFTING THAN WEAPONS IN SCHOOLS.

However, as we're writing this message, the Republican leadership in the Michigan Legislature is once again tap-dancing on the wrong side of history while waving a banner declaring their disdain for the democratic process.

With little warning, the Michigan Senate passed a dangerous package of bills in November to allow concealed weapons in schools and other gun-free zones. MEA has communicated about this since we heard—two days before the full Senate voted “yes” along mostly party lines.

Senate Bills 584-586 were heading next to the state House—and possibly the governor's desk. Wherever they are in the approval process by the time this magazine reaches your home, we hope you'll make your voice heard with your lawmakers.

If you're not in the loop, sign up to receive MEA email newsletters at www.MEA.org/signup.

Call or email your representative. Send a message to the governor's office. The answer to violence in schools is not more guns—in fact, it's a recipe for disaster. Making it legal to conceal a pistol in a preschool is a

tragedy waiting to happen, regardless of the training concealed weapon holders undergo.

- ▶ When a gun is brought into a school—legally or illegally—it's going to disrupt student learning. If a gun is seen, schools will err on the side of caution and lock down buildings, because there's no way to know the intent of the person carrying the weapon—someone properly licensed to carry or someone there to do harm. These lockdowns grind student learning to a halt and create major anxiety among students, parent and staff.
- ▶ The only people who should be carrying a gun in a school are law enforcement and security professionals. The few extra hours of training these bills would require pale in comparison to the lifetime of professional training and practice that police officers undergo to know how to handle a stressful situation with a gun.
- ▶ Instead of allowing weapons in schools, lawmakers should make gun-free zones truly gun free by eliminating the controversial loophole that allows concealed weapon

license holders to open carry a gun in these locations.

Marine Corps veteran Sen. David Knezek (D-Dearborn Heights) agrees with our position; Knezek has received advanced training on how to carry and use a weapon and knows that “guns and classrooms do not mix.”

“Other states are looking to keep weapons out of the hands of dangerous criminals and out of the classroom,” Knezek said. “Michigan is looking to put in an express lane.”

While we're on the topic, we want to take the opportunity to address a fallacy we often hear in conversations with members: All politicians are the same; they all make wrong policies.

It's not true. We communicate frequently with lawmakers, as do MEA's hard-working lobbyists. We can tell you without a doubt there are politicians who value public schools and want to do right by the school employees who work to ensure a great education for every student.

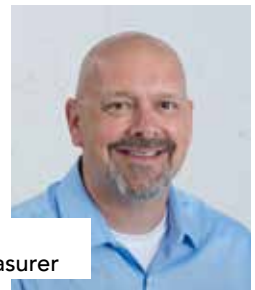
It's also true that some politicians have refused to listen to the experts in the field. They've continued to enact bad education policies regardless of the outcome. But rather than condemn all politicians—let's sort out the friends from the foes, and vote accordingly next year. **V**



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The MEA Voice ISSN 1077-4564 is an official publication of the Michigan Education Association, 1216 Kendale Blvd., East Lansing, MI 48823. Opinions stated in the MEA Voice do not necessarily reflect the official position of the MEA unless so identified. Published by Michigan Education Association, Box 2573, East Lansing, MI 48826-2573. Periodicals postage paid at East Lansing and additional mailing offices. Payment of the active membership fee entitles a member to receive the MEA Voice. Of each annual fee whether for active or affiliate membership, \$12.93 is for a year's subscription. Frequency of issue is September, December, February, April and August. **POSTMASTER:** Send address changes to the MEA Voice, Box 2573, East Lansing, MI 48826-2573 or via email at webmaster@mea.org. Allow at least three weeks for change of address to take effect. MEA Voice telephone: 517-332-6551 or 800-292-1934. Circulation this issue: 111,304.



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Editor's Notebook

When my English students wrote about personal experience, I used to give them standard advice to place the reader in the action: "Don't just tell how *you* were feeling when something happened. Make the *reader* feel it, too."

I know from experience how daunting that advice can be. Every day I meet MEA members and leaders who invite me into their lives. They share their stories and truths. And I am moved—to tears, laughter, and shivers down the spine—in ways I hope readers will experience, too.

The members you'll meet in this issue of *MEA Voice* are a case in point—an antidote to the tearing down of educators and public schools we've witnessed for 25 years. Talking with them, I felt pride in the public service that school employees provide with little recognition or fanfare.

In this month's cover story, you'll read about former U.S. Marine Corps Lt. Col. Bryan Forney, badly injured in a horrific helicopter crash four years ago—now a first-year teacher in Grand Rapids. He says of his decision to enter the classroom at age 42:

"I'm not a part of making Marines anymore; I'm not a part of winning battles anymore, but I can help make better citizens and that's what I'm here for. I look at the job of a high school teacher as protecting democracy, because what we need is informed, engaged citizens in this country."

You'll see the second installment of a year-long series traveling the course of one school year with two passionate young teachers just starting out in their careers. In this stretch of the school year, they hit the exhaustion phase but kept working hard to keep their commitment to kids.

You'll learn from local leaders and members who are stepping up to do their part in implementing a new MEA organizing initiative that provides tools to strengthen our union from the ground up. Marshaling our forces is how we fight back.

And you'll meet three Pontiac paraeducators who stepped in to coach their district's Special Olympics basketball team just four years ago and now are headed with their players to represent Michigan at the 2018 Special Olympics USA Games in Seattle next summer.

Those coaches and players were thrilled by a recent surprise visit to a practice by Detroit Pistons star Andre Drummond—an admirable man who's using his platform as a celebrity athlete to give back to his community, particularly young people with special needs.

But I told the parapro-coaches—who often give their players rides to and from practices and now are conducting all of the fundraising for the team's trip next year—"You're my heroes."

I hope you'll feel as moved by these MEA members and leaders as I was—and be inspired to tell your story that reveals the truth about public education. Contact me at bortega@mea.org.

—Brenda Ortega, editor

20%

Percentage of **school-age children with diagnosable mental health issues** in the U.S. Experts say 80 percent of those children do not receive needed mental health services, which can lead to absenteeism, low achievement, disruptive behavior, and dropping out. At issue in schools: a lack of resources and skyrocketing caseloads for counselors, social workers, and psychologists.

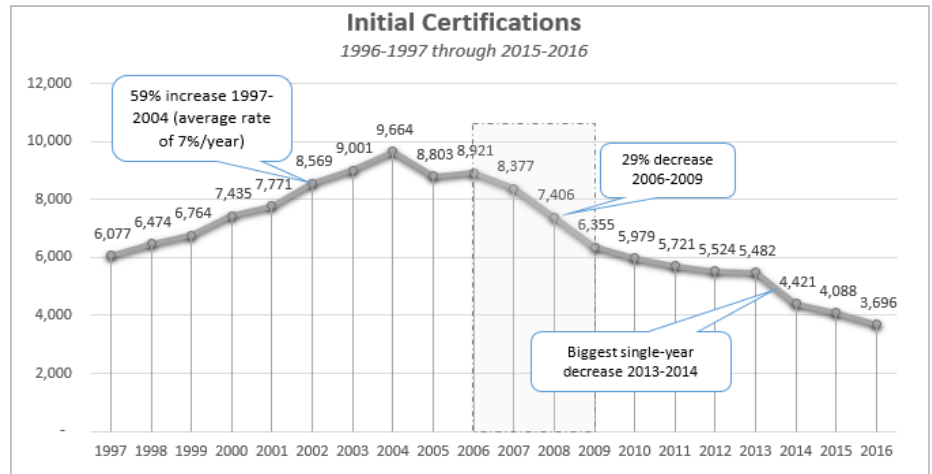
QUOTABLES

"Here's what I would say to Betsy DeVos—do those parents really understand what they're sending their kids to?"

Mark DiRocco, executive director of the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators, speaking about that state's nation-leading proliferation of low-performing online charter schools. None of Pennsylvania's cyber charters meet the state's "passing" benchmark, and together the virtual schools post a dismal 48 percent graduation rate, according to a recent *Politico* story, "DeVos Champions Online Charter Schools, but the Results are Poor."

ICYMI

The number of **new Michigan teaching certificates issued** declined by 62 percent since 2004—a drop far steeper than the reduction in student or teacher populations, according to a recent analysis issued by the Michigan Department of Education. While not exploring in-depth the question of why fewer people are entering the profession, the analysis does point to new laws passed since 2010 as possible culprits: “In a short amount of time, teachers experienced significant new threats to their job security (via evaluation, school reform models requiring staff turnover, and loss of tenure protections) paired with a decline in compensation and benefits.”



Source: Trends in Michigan Teacher Certification, Michigan Department of Education

ABOVE AND BEYOND

Pontiac elementary students got a yummy lesson in garden-to-table nutrition recently when they harvested 500 pounds of spuds from the school vegetable patch and food service staff used the bounty to whip up cheesy potatoes for everyone. This is the sixth year of Herrington Elementary School’s garden under the direction of MEA member Ailene Steinborn, a 25-year classroom veteran. “I knew nothing about gardening when I started, but I knew I was passionate about nutrition,” the first-grade teacher said. Several teachers use the garden as an outdoor classroom to make learning more relevant for students. “They’re so engaged when they’re in the garden,” Steinborn said. “It’s healing and it’s motivating. The self-esteem that they get—it changes lives.” Read more at www.tinyurl.com/Pontiac-garden.



QUOTABLES

“If it’s a tax, is this a special tax for teachers? If I’m a teacher, I’m going to pay a special teacher tax?”

Michigan Supreme Court Justice **Richard Bernstein**, questioning the attorney for the state during oral arguments in the lawsuit brought by MEA and AFT Michigan in the so-called 3 percent case, seeking the return of \$550 million in money taken from 200,000 public school employees. Read our full story about the Nov. 8 hearing at www.tinyurl.com/3-supreme.

UPCOMING EVENTS

February 8-9***Bargaining, Public Affairs & Professional Development Conference*****Cobo Center, Detroit**

MEA's biggest conference of the year provides updated information and sharpens members' skills in advocacy, communications, member engagement, negotiations, political action and professional development. This year's theme is "Nevertheless, We Persist—Don't Stop Believing." Register at www.mea.org/bpa.

March 2***Read Across America*****Nationwide**

"You're never too old, too wacky, too wild, to pick up a book and read with a child." Join NEA members from across the country in celebrating the work of Dr. Seuss and the joy of reading. Visit www.NEA.org/ReadAcross for resources and ideas.

March 23-24***ESP Statewide Conference*****Somerset Inn, Troy**

Education support professionals will gather to network and get training on topics such as legal issues, ESP certification, privatization, school violence, and member outreach and engagement. The winner of the Leon A. Brunner Award will be honored.

March 24***Student MEA Conference*****MEA Headquarters, East Lansing**

University student members from across the state will gather for training sessions that cover the legal, professional and personal issues affecting education and education employees.

MEA Scholarship Application Now Open

Dependents of MEA members or MEA-Retired members in good standing can apply to receive a 2018 MEA Scholarship. The application form is now available online at www.mea.org/mea-scholarship.

Last year, 22 new winners and 19 returning college students were awarded scholarships totaling \$47,250. The dollar amount for the 2018 scholarships and the number of scholarships to be awarded will be determined at the March 29 Scholarship Fund Trustees' meeting.

The online application allows users to enter text into it and then can be saved and printed to mail. If you need additional information, please contact Barb Hitchcock at bhitchcock@mea.org.

For eligibility and selection criteria, and to access the application, go to www.mea.org/mea-scholarship.

***Download the new MEA App***

The MEA App has a brand new interface—download or update it now for handy access to many benefits of membership.

The official MEA mobile app allows members to view benefits and discounts; stay up-to-date on union news, events, and training schedules; find and contact lawmakers; and connect with the MEA Help Center and offices around the state.

Go to the iPhone "App Store" or Android's "Google Play" and search for "Michigan Education Association" to get connected.

Service Project Benefits Active-Duty Soldiers



Note: As a proud MEA member, high school teacher, and student leadership advisor, I asked two journalism students to write an article explaining a hugely successful community service project we've conducted in Lake Orion. Sponsored in part by our local education association, LOEA, this event focuses our students' attention on the needs of military personnel serving on our behalf around the world, and it asks our kids to sacrifice something important to them for one day—their cell phones. In the process of unplugging our devices and giving to others, we all come together. If you would like information about setting up a similar event, contact me—Lori Hogan—at Lora.Hogan@LOK12.org.

EVERY YEAR SINCE 2015, STUDENTS “CELL OUT” AT LAKE ORION HIGH SCHOOL. IN JANUARY, STUDENTS VOLUNTEER TO TURN IN THEIR CELL PHONES FOR ONE WHOLE SCHOOL DAY IN A SERVICE PROJECT FIRST STARTED BY ADVISORS LORI HOGAN, KIRK WEBER AND AMY REDMAN.

For each phone collected, the leadership class donates one dollar to a non-profit organization, Cell Phones for Soldiers, which provides free calling cards to active-duty military members to connect with loved ones.

On Cell Out day, sleepy teenagers enter school and line up at tables run by students in the leadership group. Yellow slips detailing conditions of phones are bubbled in; devices are bubble-wrapped and handed over to the trusted hands of the Cell Out committee; and the teens rush to pull on their free, sponsored American-themed T-shirts.

A monochromatic scene of either

red, white, or blue—depending on the year's chosen color—floods the senses as more than 2,000 students in matching shirts mingle together. Communication between everyone in the building is heightened.

Leadership member Douglas Mason II said that students without phones talk more with each other about issues not often addressed on a daily basis inside the halls of a typical high school.

“I think the day is powerful as a whole,” Mason said. “It's not just a day to not be on your phone; it is a day to help people. You could drastically affect someone overseas that is fighting for our country—and I think

that you can't take away from how important that is.”

The project hits close to home for senior Bailey Salisbury, who has two brothers serving in the military and knows that hearing from them is “the best feeling a sibling could have.”

The \$4,000 raised through Cell Out in 2015 alone equated to two thousand hours—or approximately 83 days—of talk time for soldiers and their families. Lake Orion High School is the only school in the nation to do this type of project to benefit Cell Phones for Soldiers.

“Everybody here is willing to participate and it's really just an example of how good LOHS is as a school,” Mason said. **V**

—by Josephine Graham and Laura Hartman

Legislative Councils Use One Simple Rule

THIS WILL SOUND STRANGE, BUT ONE TYPE OF ACTIVITY WE REGULARLY CONDUCT AS LOBBYISTS REQUIRES US TO THREATEN OUR MEA MEMBERS WITH A SWIFT KICK! BEFORE YOU GET TOO ALARMED, LET US CLARIFY THAT WE HAVE FORTUNATELY NOT YET HAD TO FOLLOW THROUGH ON THAT WARNING.

The threat comes before Legislative Councils, informal meetings that members and leaders all over the state hold on a regular basis with their state representatives and senators—both Democrats and Republicans—some of whom we agree with, and some... not so much.

That is where the (somewhat tongue-in-cheek) possibility of a kick comes in.

These meetings are held at a restaurant over dinner, with only one rule that we follow: “Dialogue, not debate.” There is no agenda, training, or follow-up debriefing. Everyone arrives at the same time and leaves at the same time to prevent pre-planning or post-gossip.

“Dialogue, not debate.”

The goal of Legislative Councils might sound loosey-goosey, but it lays solid groundwork for a productive relationship. Our goal is for the legislator to enjoy the experience enough to want to return and continue the conversation with our members.

Hence, if anyone were to argue, criticize, or otherwise attempt to debate about political issues or policies in ways that created a confrontational

atmosphere, we would have to kick that person under the table as a polite reminder of the one and only rule. Dialogue, not debate.

Generally, Legislative Councils are attended by 6-12 MEA members of all kinds, plus local leaders and staff, in addition to the lawmaker (who occasionally brings a guest). Sometimes we lobbyists attend Legislative Councils in a particular region where they are just getting started. In other places, our people have done enough of the meetings to continue unaided.

Again, we have never had to make an under-the-table reminder in many years of Legislative Councils. We did have to quit one session that devolved into angry feelings, but that resulted from behavior

by a state senator intent on riling up the dinner party with combative statements.

The vast majority of Legislative Councils are a great opportunity for our members to discuss issues, to share specific classroom experiences, and to illuminate needs for more support. Often the relationships become friendly enough that our members feel comfortable calling



*By Christina Canfield and David Michelson
MEA Lobbyists*

their lawmakers’ offices to comment on pending legislation—and their calls get through.

These discussions can make legislators more sensitive to educators’ classroom and professional needs. Non-confrontational dialogue can help policymakers understand the work of support staff and the often-ignored realities they face in ensuring students are safe, healthy, and well-fed; and schools are warm, clean, and smoothly operating.

The conversation at Legislative Councils can lead lawmakers to modify legislation or opt out of sponsoring bills that would create obstacles to effective public schools.

It can be tempting to argue and debate with politicians, so we continually remind our Legislative Council participants of the rule—Dialogue, not debate. Fortunately it is our honor to work with smart and passionate professionals who learn fast, work hard, and lead with their hearts. **V**

New MESSA options reduce amount taken from your check

MESSA HAS INTRODUCED A NUMBER OF NEW PLAN OPTIONS DESIGNED TO LOWER THE AMOUNT THAT COMES OUT OF EMPLOYEE PAYCHECKS—WITHOUT SACRIFICING MESSA'S LARGE NETWORK OF PROVIDERS AND LEGENDARY MEMBER SERVICE.

In combination, these new options can reduce the amount withheld from members' paychecks by several hundred dollars a month.

Coinsurance

New coinsurance options are now available for certain Choices and ABC plans. Coinsurance is a percentage amount you pay for health care services after your deductible is met. You would not pay coinsurance for services that already require a copayment, such as office or urgent care visits.

The amount you would have to pay out-of-pocket each year in coinsurance and copayments is capped at your in-network medical out-of-pocket maximum, which varies depending on your plan.

Mandatory mail prescriptions

With the mandatory mail rider, most long-term maintenance medications must be obtained through the mail from the Express Scripts Pharmacy, our home delivery service.

The riders are available with certain MESSA plan combinations.

3-Tier drug plan

The 3-Tier prescription plans split brand-name prescriptions into two tiers. The addition of a third tier for expensive brand drugs that have a generic equivalent helps MESSA keep the premium for the plan down. The amount a member pays for a prescription varies depending on its tier.

Tier 1 drugs are largely generics. Tier 2 drugs are brand-name drugs for which there is no generic or other alternative. Tier 3 drugs are brand-name drugs that have generic or therapeutic alternatives that are generally much less expensive.

As with coinsurance and mandatory mail, the 3-Tier drug plan is compatible with certain MESSA medical plans. **V**

Learn more

No matter your bargaining unit's circumstances, there's likely a MESSA health plan that will work for you. If you'd like to talk to someone about ways to reduce your health care costs, call your MESSA field representative at 800.292.4910. He or she can provide specific details for your group.



From USMC to GRPS: 'Serving is in my blood'

By Brenda Ortega
MEA Voice Editor



TO SAY MEA MEMBER BRYAN FORNEY HAS COME A LONG WAY IN LESS THAN FIVE YEARS WOULD BE A RADICAL UNDERSTATEMENT.

On Feb. 20, 2013, the former U.S. Marine Corps lieutenant colonel was trapped in a burning helicopter on a mountain top in Thailand, both knees crushed and his left arm shattered and useless, watching flames cross the ceiling as he thought, *I'm not going to make it. This is it.*

Today he's a 42-year-old first-year educator at Innovation Central High School in Grand Rapids with a story of how he came to be teaching algebra and astronomy at an urban public high school as miraculous as it is inspirational.

"My dad raised me to leave the world a better place than I found it,

so I want to give back," he says of his second career in the classroom. "I don't know any other way to be."

Even some doctors didn't expect Forney to survive following an evacuation flight from Singapore to the military's only burn center in San Antonio, which set a record as the longest single-leg medevac flight in history—a 19.5-hour trip that required mid-air refueling.

"That's my claim to fame, and I slept through the whole thing so I don't remember it," he said, laughing.

Forney had suffered life-threatening burns over 54 percent of his body, "the entire front, down to the tops of

my boots." Coupled with devastating damage to his limbs, which led doctors to amputate his arm and left him unable to walk, "I was definitely in bad shape," he said. "It was touch-and-go until probably the middle of April."

Five burn and reconstructive surgeons and an orthopedic doctor worked on him simultaneously when he arrived at Brooke Army Medical Center, and more surgeries would follow. Forney lost his entire left kneecap to burn injuries. He fought infections for months and lost half of his right kneecap to infection.

He spent five months in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) and 14 months in a wheelchair. Physical therapy began in the ICU, where a tilt table kept his body used to being upright

and therapists did range-of-motion exercises, moving his limbs even while Forney was unconscious.

“I came out of this with a very profound respect for physical therapists,” he said. “The doctors tell you, ‘Well, you might not get better. And you might never be able to do this or that again.’ Physical therapists will help you figure out how to do it.”

The work to regain use of his body was brutal. The first time he stood, six assistants and a set of parallel bars helped him stay “upright-ish” for 20 seconds, “and I’ve never been so exhausted in my life. I sat down and was like ‘I don’t think I can do anything for two more days.’”

He walks now with a heavy limp on his left side, aided by a set of custom-made Intrepid Dynamic Exoskeletal Orthoses (IDEO) braces—invented in 2010—which strap over his legs and around his feet with a carbon fiber strut up the back of his leg to perform functions that nerve damage and muscle loss prevent his calves and ankles from doing.

He wears a prosthetic arm, although recently blistering of scarred skin underneath the socket—which attaches by suction—prevented him from wearing it. Being without his left arm “triples the amount of time it takes me to get ready to go to work in the morning,” he said.

“Even doing stuff in the classroom is easier with my prosthetic, because I can carry stuff with my left arm while I’m walking.”

Beyond his physical challenges, however, Forney struggles with the same issues facing every teacher—especially new educators. How to manage the workload. How to motivate students. How to teach teenagers challenging concepts in a subject that some find intimidating.

He manages three different class preps—Algebra I and II and astronomy—meaning he has three different lessons to prepare each day and lots of grading to manage. He’s trying to figure out how to keep up without



Bryan Forney provides one-on-one attention to help students at Grand Rapids Innovation Central High School see the importance of algebra and build confidence in their own abilities. Even on the tough days, he says, it’s important to believe “You’re making a difference.”

cutting into sleep.

Stress and lack of rest make him vulnerable to cellulitis, an infection common in burn patients that breaks out in the soft tissue under the skin. He was hospitalized for an outbreak in October, “and if you ask my wife she’ll say it was the result of too many late nights in a row,” he said.

His approach to the job focuses on

relevance, modeling and practice—with one-on-one attention in class and after school. He reminds students again and again, during class and in private conversations, to study the model solutions posted in Google classroom, abandon the “I can’t” mindset, and jump into the struggle.

“Every job I’ve ever had has required some knowledge of algebra



During a 20-year career in the U.S. Marine Corps, former Lt. Col. Bryan Forney earned a Bachelor's degree in aerospace engineering and a Master's degree in applied physics. He flew CH-46 helicopters in deployments all over the world, including wartime service in Iraq and Marine Expeditionary Units in Asia, the Middle East, and Australia.

and some ability to solve problems, even if it's not doing algebra," he said. "Learning that algebraic thought process, learning how to analyze and break down a problem, solve it piece by piece and put together a solution—that's a useful way to approach the world."

Forney is challenged by the questions of teaching: how to help students who haven't mastered the foundational skills from middle school; how to get students to believe in the importance of math; how to build their confidence in their own ability to be successful.

"I'm trying to figure it out," he said. "I think the right answer is figuring out what it is about algebra you

actually want kids to know, so they can use algebra, and focusing on that. It's about more than passing a test. At the end of the day, I'm not going to hang my hat on my SAT score."

Three-quarters of students at Innovation Central High School come from low-income families, and several languages are spoken at the Grand Rapids "theme school," made up of four college and career prep academies housed in one building.

With such diversity, the toughest teaching days for Forney are not when students don't understand—it's the times when they don't try, when they aren't engaged and they're distracting others or trying to pull their friends off-task.

"I've got moments of frustration where—I don't know what it is. Are they tired? Are they distracted? Do they have something going on that keeps them from engaging? Did they not eat today? Where did they sleep last night? What is putting them in a mindset where they can't focus on what they need to do?"

He's trying to focus on building relationships, but it's tough with five classes of kids coming and going every day. He keeps his perspective by drawing on rich life experience and a lesson learned from 20 years in the Marines: "You're making a difference to somebody."

"Even on those days when you feel like the machine has ground you up

and spit you out, and you've made no impact on the world, you've got to keep going," he says. "You don't know what your example, or your effort, or even what your failure has produced in somebody else, a spark that's going to create something."

Watching Forney at work is a lesson in contradictions: He's slow-moving but high-energy. Intense but quick to laugh. A man covered by scar tissue who's completely comfortable in his own skin.

"He cares about us, but he's firm when we have work to do, and he's persistent with us," said Ivonne Cruz, a junior in his Algebra II class who dreams of becoming an anesthesiologist or mechanical engineer. "He wants us to get good grades. When I first walked in to this class, I was scared. He looks like he's mad, but he's not. He's nice."

He's also open with students about his story. He tells them everything, and answers questions. Some in his situation might not want to talk about it—Forney understands that—but honest self-reflection is part of his Marine upbringing and a necessary part of being a military pilot.

He remembers everything about that day.

He was second-in-command of a squadron based on Okinawa, flying a training flight in a mountainous region outside of Phitsanulok, a historic city in Lower Northern Thailand, as part of a multi-national exercise conducted annually.

He was demonstrating a "main mount" landing where his CH-46 helicopter lands with the back wheels on a ledge and the front of the aircraft hanging off. With the two crew chiefs doing lookout in the back and focused on avoiding rock crevices, one rear rotor blade hit a tree and broke.

With nowhere to set down, staring at a 4,000-foot drop, Forney lifted the helicopter to get back over the mountain, but the loss of power and control felt like "an out-of-balance



Friendship with Actor/Activist Sustains Forney Family

Bryan Forney literally doesn't remember the first time he met award-winning actor Gary Sinise.

Forney was lying critically wounded in a burn unit at Brooke Army Medical Center when Sinise visited. The former Marine Corps officer and pilot was wrapped in thick bandages from head to toe, but Sinise made a point to stop at his bedside to offer encouragement.

Best known for his role as Lt. Dan in the film *Forrest Gump*, Sinise has become a hero to military personnel. He founded the "Lt. Dan Band" to entertain troops at Invincible Spirit Festivals organized by his Gary Sinise Foundation, which raises money for wounded warriors.

"He's a great guy who is amazingly devoted to injured service members," Forney said. "He had to suit up in all kinds of protective stuff to be able to come in and see me at the hospital."

Sinise struck up a friendship with Forney and his wife, Jennie, via email after that visit in March 2013, following Forney's injury in a horrific helicopter crash just a month earlier. The actor and activist saw Forney again seven months later, when he remained in a wheelchair.

It wasn't until a year later—in October 2014—that Sinise would again see Forney, then walking with revolutionary IDEO (Intrepid Dynamic Exoskeletal Orthoses) braces, invented in 2010.

Watch a moving ESPN Veteran's Day video of the emotional reunion between Sinise and Forney at www.tinyurl.com/Forney-Sinise, and view a 3-minute clip from a PBS documentary featuring Forney in his IDEO braces at www.tinyurl.com/Forney-IDEO.

washing machine times a million,” he said. The aircraft ripped apart and crashed on the mountain top.

Both crew chiefs were thrown clear, with one seriously injured. Meanwhile, the co-pilot—briefly knocked unconscious—awoke and was helped out by the uninjured crew chief. Forney, however, was stuck.

His side of the helicopter sat up against a pile of rock. His left hand, which had been operating a control, was shattered. The force of the crash had driven his humerus bone into his shoulder socket, and he couldn’t pull himself free of the cockpit.

Even after he found a way to get his feet across his co-pilot’s seat, he had no way to pull himself out. There was nothing to grab to his right, and his left arm was flopping and helpless. The fire was burning across the ceiling, and the crew chief called to him.

“Even on those days when you feel like the machine has ground you up and spit you out, and you’ve made no impact on the world, you’ve got to keep going.”

“I remember yelling for my crew chief, but he never heard me calling for him,” Forney said. “I was running out of oxygen, so my voice was getting really weak.”

That’s when he figured his life was over, he says. He would never see his wife and three children again. Time stood still. What felt like forever took probably 30 seconds.

“Just as I was realizing I’m not going to make it—this is it—the crew chief made one last attempt to come up,” Forney said. “He basically ran into a burning airplane, found my feet, grabbed them, and pulled me out.”

It took more than three hours for a helicopter to arrive and transport them to a hospital in Phitsanulok. Forney was conscious but felt no pain because of shock and adrenaline. He remembers the emergency room, a

nurse intubating him before administering pain medication.

After finally being sedated, his awareness of day-to-day events faded for the next few weeks.

Junior Oscar Muñoz, who admits to struggling in Algebra II, said it was inspiring to hear Forney’s story in class. “He’s been through so much, and seeing him being able to teach with his disabilities makes me think I can do more,” Muñoz said.

Forney jokes that all he did once he got to the hospital was “not stop breathing,” while doctors, nurses and physical therapists performed the hard work. He acknowledges “tough days” when he felt sorry for himself, but his Marine Corps attitude pulled him through, he said.

“It’s just, ‘OK, this is the situation you’re in; you make the most of it now. Deal with it.’ I don’t want to sound flippant about it, but what

other choice did I have? I had a wife and three kids to get back to. What was I going to do? Give up?”

He credits his wife of 17 years, Jennie, for staying by his side from the accident forward, being his advocate and caregiver, while keeping track of their children’s well-being. Once he was released from the hospital, Jennie did five hours of wound care and bandaging each day.

“I wouldn’t have made it without her,” he said.

Last summer, Forney retired from the Marines after finishing his service commanding Wounded Warrior Battalion-East Detachment San Antonio—capping a career that included deployments all over the world, including wartime service in Iraq and Marine Expeditionary Units in Asia, the Middle East, and Australia.

“I miss the Marines, and I’m always going to miss them,” he said. “They’re family.”

But it was time for his two sons, ages 14 and 7, and 10-year-old daughter to settle down, he said. The family moved to Lowell, east of Grand Rapids, to be near family. Forney had graduated from Okemos High School in 1993.

Growing up in a military family—his dad was an officer in the Marines, and military service goes back generations in his lineage—Forney originally wanted to be a scientist, until he got the flying bug in seventh grade.

He earned a Bachelor’s degree in aerospace engineering from the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis and attended flight school in Florida for two years before shipping out on one deployment after another for years.

He didn’t get the teaching bug until shortly after his first child was born. The Marine Corps sent him to get a Master’s degree in applied physics at the Naval Postgraduate School, then assigned him to teach midshipmen back at the Naval Academy in Maryland. He resisted the idea at first.

“I was like, ‘Really? I don’t want to go there.’ I fought it tooth and nail, but I got there and ended up having a blast. It ended up being one of the most rewarding tours of my career.”

He returned to the idea of being a teacher while recuperating from his injuries and finishing his Marine Corps service, completing a teacher certification program and student teaching in Texas during the past year.

He accepted the position in Grand Rapids not long after that, because he’s not good at sitting around, he says.

“I spent an entire military career defending democracy, standing up for what I think is right, trying to make the world a better place, and I’m not going to stop serving now. It’s in my blood.” **V**

Pontiac Paraprofessionals Build ‘Special’ Program

By Brenda Ortega
MEA Voice Editor



L-R: Fred McFadden, Larry Redmond, and Tony Pittman

BEFORE GRADUATING FROM A PONTIAC HIGH SCHOOL 36 YEARS AGO, MEA MEMBER TONY PITTMAN WAS A STAR QUARTERBACK AND BASEBALL PLAYER WHO DREAMED OF GOING PRO. LIKE MANY, PITTMAN PLAYED OUT HIS HOPES IN COLLEGE BUT NOT BEYOND, THEN MOVED ON TO WORKING AND RAISING A FAMILY.

Now the grandfather of eight and longtime Pontiac paraeducator is heading to the Olympics—a trip that can be called “special” in more ways than one.

Next summer Pittman will take the members of his Pontiac Kennedy School basketball team to compete at the national level of the Special Olympics USA Games in Seattle—a first for a Pontiac team—joined by assistant coaches Fred McFadden and Larry Redmond.

If it’s his “calling” to work by day with students who have special needs at the school, Pittman says, then head coaching a Special Olympics basketball team after hours is his “joy.”

“When I see them smiling and laughing, that’s what I take pride in,” Pittman said. “I know they have

dreams too, and they want to experience those things like everyone else does, and I wanted to help them get there. It touches my heart, and I just love it.”

All three coaches are paraeducators in Pontiac. Pittman and Redmond work at Kennedy Center, where students have physical, cognitive, or intellectual disabilities that allow them to attend the school up to age 26; and McFadden works with autistic students at Pontiac High School.

“That excites me and makes me proud that it’s the paraprofessionals here in Pontiac leading this basketball program,” said McFadden, president of the local MEA unit representing paraprofessionals in Pontiac. “We have wonderful paraprofessionals in this district. We wear a lot of hats; we’re constantly

busy, and we’re always teaching.”

In just their fourth year of coaching the school’s basketball team, the three friends have notched three state titles in Special Olympics competition, including back-to-back state championships in their first two years, 2014 and 2015; a narrow loss in 2016; and another win this past spring.

The seven-day national competition in July 2018 will take the team’s 10 players to a new level of attention—as their luggage is shipped ahead of them, they travel by private airplane, and the team plays in games televised on ESPN.

And for the first time ever, the results of the USA Games will be used as a qualifier for entry into the Abu Dhabi World Games in March 2019, according to Aaron Mills, senior marketing and communications director of Special Olympics Michigan.

At a recent team practice, assistant coach McFadden reminded scrimmaging players they were preparing



Pontiac's Kennedy School Panthers basketball team is preparing for next summer's trip to the Special Olympics USA Games in Seattle—

to face tougher teams and unforgiving referees.

"Hey, where are you walking with that ball?" he asked a point guard who took a few too many steps after picking up his dribble. "We're at the national level now—they're going to call us out on that!"

In truth, the focus of going to Seattle is not just on winning but on giving these players the experience of a lifetime, McFadden says.

The coaches are doing all of the work to raise \$12,000 for the team to make the trip and for players to have some spending money while there for a week. Some team members work at jobs and live on their own with support. Others live with families that also can't afford to pay.

Many don't have a car of their own, so Pittman and the assistant coaches frequently pick up players for practice and take them home. Now they're promising to transport the young people farther than they've ever gone before.

"We're saying 'Let us do the work and we'll get you to Seattle, and we're going to make some memories to

hold onto for the rest of our lives,'" McFadden said.

When representatives from Special Olympics Michigan surprised the team with news they would be going to Seattle next July, "It was like watching little children on Christmas Day getting a gift they didn't think was coming their way," he added.

Team captain and star player Nate Perkins, 23, said he was shocked by the invitation, which still feels like a dream-come-true. "I was like, 'Wow, this cannot be real,' but we earned it. We worked for it."

The team's success represents something bigger than an exciting trip for many kids who've never before flown on an airplane or traveled outside of Michigan.

Not unlike Flint boxer Claressa Shields, whose gold medals in the 2012 and 2016 Olympic Games gave her hometown something to cheer about, the Kennedy Panthers are a good news story in a city that has seen its share of tough luck.

Hit hard economically by the loss of its manufacturing base, the city of Pontiac struggled for years under a

succession of state emergency managers, and the school district has been slashing budgets for four years under a consent agreement with the state.

School employees have borne the worst of the sacrifices, enduring pay cuts and several years of wage and step freezes toward eliminating the district's deficit.

"This is my home," McFadden said. "Pontiac gets a bad rap, but our goal is to try to get a positive spotlight shining on our program."

Next fall, the coaching trio plans to expand the city's Special Olympics program to include volleyball and floor hockey teams with players drawn from throughout Pontiac—not just students at Kennedy.

The Panthers have a lot of talent. They play a fast and aggressive style of basketball. Their strength is teamwork and communication, but the coaches are always working on improving the players' resilience when a game isn't going their way—getting focused instead of frustrated.

"We constantly teach them how to be good athletes, how to be good sportsmen, how to conduct them-



which for most of them will be their first travel by plane or out-of-state.

selves,” McFadden said. “We’re big on respect; we encourage them to shake hands before the game, because again—we want to take away that negative image of Pontiac.”

Sometimes the negativity flows from the opposing team’s stands. The Panthers have endured shouted racial taunts and slurs from some audience members at high-stakes games in their title runs, but their composure and teamwork draw even more compliments.

“Wherever we go, these guys are great and respectful in the community because we have high expectations,” head coach Pittman said.

In recent weeks, the Panthers received advice for the Seattle trip from an especially credible source: Detroit Pistons star Andre Drummond (pictured above) surprised the group by showing up at one of their practices. He told them to stick together like family and work together as a team.

Pierre Leak, the Panthers 6-foot-2 center, said he suddenly felt short after 6-foot-11 Drummond defended him under the basket. Later, Leak won a shootout challenge in which Drum-

mond offered \$1 to the first person to sink the ball from half court.

“To think I played with a NBA player on the court,” said Leak, who added he used to have a housekeeping job at the Palace of Auburn Hills before the Pistons moved back to Detroit.

Nate Perkins, the Panthers captain, swished two three-point shots over Drummond during scrimmage, and each time he did a fist-pumping strut. One of the team’s two female players, Alexis Fitch, said she was “about to cry” when she got to guard her favorite NBA player.

Drummond’s appearance occurred without press coverage or fanfare, arranged through his community service foundation by staff and volunteers at Special Olympics Michigan.

Head coach Pittman seemed as excited as his players.

“What a great person,” the former high school star athlete said of Drummond. “It’s a blessing, it’s an honor, it’s a night these kids won’t ever forget. I couldn’t believe it either—how tall he was!”

His players are enjoying life right now, Pittman said, and that’s what he

The three Pontiac paraeducators who coach the Panthers basketball team have been hard at work raising money to send the team to the Special Olympics USA Games in Seattle next July—holding raffles and bowling night fundraisers. Others can donate to help cover the Panthers’ expenses through the Special Olympics Michigan fundraising page by going to www.FirstGiving.com/SOMiArea/Area15USA.

wants. It’s why—in addition to the medals his players received for their state titles—he personally bought three separate large-sized gold cup trophies to display at the school.

“I want them to feel special and important, because they deserve it,” Pittman said. **V**

START OF A JOURNEY

Stories by Brenda Ortega
MEA Voice Editor

In Part Two of our year-long series chronicling the challenges and triumphs of two early career educators, we visit Brittney Norman and Zack Griffin during the time of year when the honeymoon has worn off, difficult student behaviors crop up, grades and evaluations become a factor, and exhaustion sets in.

Both Norman and Griffin are part of an MEA-NEA pilot program, **MiNewEd**, designed to assist newer educators with connections and support through their early years in the profession.

Brittney Norman: ‘I Care so Much about my Kids’

A little more than midway through the relentless stretch of school year between Labor Day and the holidays, third-year teacher Brittney Norman took off one of her two personal days to counter a feeling of burnout.

She spent the quiet hours at home preparing lessons for the fifth graders she teaches at a school in Pine River, a sprawling rural region south of Cadillac.

She knows she shouldn't use her precious few discretionary days off to catch up on grading and planning. But she had been cutting into sleep and laboring on weekends, missing time with her 7-year-old daughter to attack the bottomless black crate of work she lugged home each day.

“I felt like I was so swamped and underwater,” she said. “There really is not time. You get a 45-minute prep period—and how many times do

you really get the whole 45 minutes? When am I supposed to be doing my planning? People just don't understand how many hours we put in.”

Especially frustrating is that the same folks shaping education policy and perceptions—politicians, the media, critics in the public sphere—don't understand the demands of teaching and don't care to listen to educators trying to explain it.

“I'm not complaining about my job; I'm telling you I care so much about my kids, their performance is affecting me personally,” she said.

Near the end of the first marking period in November, the 29-year-old ended “lots of days” in tears, venting emotion that built up over the difference between the perfect classroom she envisioned in her mind and the struggles she was experiencing day-to-day.

“I want to see all of the kids on task

with what they're supposed to be doing, and talking about their learning, checking for their own understanding and having the tools to do that,” she said. “And it's just not where we are.”

Norman admits her “over-achiever” personality causes her to focus more on what needs to improve than all the ways she's doing well. For ideas and support, she relies on equally committed “teacher BFFs” willing to talk over new approaches or the latest issues.

One such Best Friend Forever is Emily Adema, a special education teacher who assists in her classroom for part of the day. Adema shares teaching strategies and points out Norman's strengths and successes when she's too overtaxed or tired to see it for herself.

“It's so nice to have somebody like that who understands my teacher



Third-year teacher Brittney Norman believes caring relationships are the key to success.

heart and what I expect from myself and my kids,” Norman said. “She understands what I want my classroom to look like and that even though it doesn’t look like that right now, it still looks good.”

Norman also is part of an MEA pilot program supporting newer educators in partnership with NEA. She and others involved in MiNewEd from Cadillac, Alpena, and Petoskey choose an annual goal or focus and receive guidance from a virtual mentor who is a master teacher.

Norman changed school districts this year after spending two years at Cadillac Area Public Schools to be closer to home, where her daughter attends second grade, which means in effect she’s navigating the difficulties of a “first year” all over again.

In addition to coaching middle school volleyball, she’s teaching a different population of students, learning a new reading program, and handling a larger number of kids—

84 in total—since her new school rotates fifth graders between a team of teachers for different subjects.

All of the teachers cover the reading curriculum with their “home” group, and Norman teaches math to all of the rotations. She’s excited about the reading curriculum, which challenges students to find themes, make inferences, and compare and contrast ideas across texts.

“I never had to think this deeply when I was in fifth grade,” she said. “The rigor is awesome, and I think it’s really preparing kids for the kinds of things they’ll be seeing on the M-STEP.”

However, she finds it difficult to reconcile the reading program’s structure, based on mastery of standards, with the pressure to fill the online gradebook with lots of grades—which parents can view through a Parent Portal.

Norman doesn’t want to grade students on newly introduced concepts,

particularly when the new ideas and skills are much harder than what the kids have seen before. She worries the grades will become labels and set up some children for failure before they’ve had time to figure things out.

Additionally, when she does enter grades, she faces the struggle of students asking about assignments they didn’t turn in or pushing her to immediately score late work to change the “Incomplete” grade in the book.

“There is always a demand on teachers,” she said. “Sometimes I want to go home and be a mom, spend time with my family and do those things for my daughter that other parents get to do.”

Another challenge of not teaching all subjects to the same group of fifth graders all day—as she did in Cadillac—has been finding time to get to know students on a personal level.

With only 60 minutes a day to teach challenging math concepts once reserved for older students, she

can't cut into time for content to figure out the reasons behind students who are regularly misbehaving or disengaged from the work—and she notes, “There’s always a reason.”

“That’s why I’m struggling at the end of the day; I feel like I haven’t made a connection with the kids yet the way I would want to.”

She uses a “clip-up, clip-down” method of classroom management in keeping with other teachers at her school. Students move a clothespin along a behavioral chart on the wall to earn rewards, but Norman tends to focus on the positive instead of the negative.

In class recently, one squirming boy was distracting others during a read-aloud about women’s suffrage.

Norman called out the girl sitting next to him, telling her: “Go clip up. I like your active listening right now, sitting criss-cross and eyes on the speaker.” The boy turned and straightened.

She also posted a magnetic chart explaining red, yellow, and green zones of behavior regulation—from her special education teacher friend—which outlines examples for students to recognize if they’re in an optimal learning zone and strategies they can use to redirect their actions.

And she points to a bigger, longer term success she’s experienced with a boy whose difficult behavior many teachers warned her about. This student spoke disrespectfully to her and occasionally walked out of

class without asking. He didn’t have many friends.

Norman gave him a job in the morning which allowed him to come into the classroom when other students were outside. The move made him feel needed and gave Norman time to talk with him informally one-on-one—and his attitude and work ethic changed.

One day in class, when she saw the boy working harder than everyone else in his group, she called him out for it. “He had the biggest smile I’ve seen on his face all year,” she said. “That’s what it’s about—taking the extra time to build relationships makes a difference. It matters.” **V**

Zack Griffin: ‘It’s a Chance to Get Better’

First-year teacher Zack Griffin has been taking some guff for his new teacher bedtime: no later than 9 p.m. “I was talking to my younger sister the other night, and I said ‘I’m going to bed,’ and she said, ‘It’s only 8:15!’”

He laughed, but the story was no joke. This 24-year-old is tired. He’s discovered a new appreciation for the sound of silence during his car ride home. And his gratitude has deepened for the empathetic listening and advice he gets from his parents who are educators.

“If I’m super stressed and I can talk about my day with my parents, and if I can hear about their day at the same time, that helps a lot,” he said. “I realize, hey—it’s not just me. I’m not the only teacher that’s going through this.”

Griffin’s other solution for stress, fatigue, and frustration goes back to

skills and habits he started learning as a toddler. He escapes Up North to hunt and fish. He unplugs from his everyday world and attunes to something bigger—quiet, stillness, birds calling, a breeze blowing the leaves.

“It’s much simpler,” he said. “There’s no complexity to the woods. I like to say it’s way cheaper than any therapy I could afford.”

As Griffin winds through his first year as a sixth-grade science teacher at Mackinaw Trail Middle School in Cadillac, he wishes he had a cloak of invisibility like Harry Potter. It might help him understand the unpredictably moody, impulsive, sometimes disrespectful behavior he witnesses among his 125 students.

“It’s the X factor,” he said. “You don’t really know what’s going on, and you wonder why did that kid have a bad day? Chances are it proba-

bly started at home and followed him to school.”

Near the end of the first quarter, Griffin wrote up his first discipline report on a student who was bullying another child. Less clear cut is how to deal with unmotivated students who don’t want to participate in groups or work on assignments.

“I have zero tolerance for lack of effort,” he said. “How can I teach if you’re not going to do anything? That’s why I’ve been making multiple calls home. Whether it’s for something good or bad, I’m calling home and the kids know it.”

Griffin offers students a clean slate every day. He talks constantly in terms of ARE (Attitude, Respect, Effort) to ask if they are giving their best. His experience as a varsity football coach at the high school—he’s offensive line coach—informs his



First-year teacher Zack Griffin continues to look for ways to get every student engaged.

teaching and his outlook.

“I definitely don’t have bad days,” he said. “I tell myself it’s a character-building moment. It’s a chance to get better—straight from my dad, and I tell it to my kids all the time: ‘You’re OK. This isn’t the end of the world.’”

The leap from student teacher to full-time faculty member means not only more students to learn about, but more of everything: more faculty meetings, more absent students to catch up to speed, more interruptions to lessons, more IEP meetings, more paperwork and data collection.

The average person doesn’t understand the volume of information coming at a teacher throughout the day, or the number of tasks that educators juggle while making decisions about how to respond or adjust to individuals and circumstances, Griffin said.

“I used to think during my student teaching that this was just straight like an arrow. No problem, I’ve got my les-

son; I’ve got all my objectives; I’ve got my assessment. All the kids are here. I’ve got all my groups figured out.

“Then all of a sudden you’ve got a kid puking, or somebody didn’t get fed breakfast this morning, or somebody looked at somebody the wrong way. We had a fire drill this morning that I didn’t know about. That took 10 minutes out of my lesson. It’s constant.”

That’s why he feels so fortunate to have landed his “dream job” straight out of college “with great students, a great staff, great administrators. I’m coaching football, and the kids are learning, so that’s pretty cool.”

He has felt supported, even during his first formal observation. The district uses the Marzano evaluation tool, which took a long time to fill out before his pre-observation conference. The tool covers 41 elements of teaching, though the district is focused most intently on five of those.

His principal reassured him the

evaluation is meant to help—not judge, Griffin says, so he wasn’t too nervous except while fighting indecision about what to do in his lesson that day. The observation went well, and he appreciated getting useful feedback afterward, he said.

“My principal helps me out a lot where he’s like, ‘Hey, man—what if you tried this?’ It helps that he was a teacher and a coach, so he knows what I’m going through.”

Griffin tries to make learning relevant and ask students to apply what they know in assessments tied to real life. It can be a struggle—as when he challenged students to survive on a deserted island with no drinking water supply during a unit on evaporation and condensation.

Some students asked about the island—if it had coconut trees or other ready sources of liquid—instead of turning to their knowledge from class. Finally other kids asked, “What if we used science?” And Griffin

watched as they devised plans to trap evaporating water as condensation.

“I was really excited about that,” he said.

His goal is to continue figuring out how to meet kids at their level and teach them something new—how to reach the quiet ones and the talkers, the advanced kids and the hiders, the students driven by grades and those few who don’t seem to care about school.

As part of his involvement in an MEA pilot program targeting new educators for additional support, Grif-

fin will work with a virtual mentor on his chosen goal for the year: differentiating his teaching. He will try new strategies and reflect on results with the help of a master teacher.

Recently he tried out a team-building activity during class after noticing his groups devolving into disagreements and dictatorships, he said. The students were asked to work together to build plastic cups into a tower using only strings to move them—no hands or other devices.

The results were an eye-opener. One boy who normally is disengaged and

off-task led his group. And the class filled with higher-achieving students struggled with the challenge more than another class of kids with lower grades and more learning difficulties.

“Connecting with all students, even the ones that are not going to want to, that’s something I want to improve on—bigtime,” he said. “I’m not Superman—I’m not going to be able to rock everything—but I want kids so hands-on deep into it, they don’t even know they’re learning.” **V**

Catch up on the first installment of our series following Norman and Griffin through one school year at www.mea.org/start-of-a-journey—and watch for more stories in *MEA Voice* through August.



Join Action at MEA-Retired

MEA-RETIRED MEMBER JO BIRD ISN'T AFRAID TO LOOK A LITTLE SILLY IN DEFENSE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION.

Bird, who is president of the Lakeshore MEA-Retired chapter, recently donned a Three Musketeers costume in a skit she's presented around the state to celebrate the union's reason for being—"All for one, and one for all."

In the skit, she and her husband Bob—who plays a reporter—educate retirees about threats to public education that require everyone to be involved in fighting back. Only strength in numbers will defeat wealthy would-be destroyers such as Betsy DeVos, the Koch brothers, the Walton family and other anti-public education organizations, Bird says.

"Their schemes are to privatize all aspects of public education, to compete with local neighborhood schools through for-profit charter and cyber schools, and to legislate vouchers to drain public schools of students and finances," she points out in the skit.

Bird is one of nearly 40,000 retired Michigan school employees who stand together as members of MEA-Retired, working to protect your retirement rights and benefits. Membership also provides retirees lifetime access to MEA/NEA discounts, insurance plans, and publications.

You can become a lifetime member of MEA-Retired for a one-time fee, and join the fight for our future while continuing to enjoy the MEA/NEA

savings and benefits you've come to love.

Membership in MEA-Retired offers discounts on products and services ranging from home, auto and life insurance to travel and leisure. Members also have access to NEA insurance plans and publications (life insurance, death benefits, and liability insurance if you return to the classroom in any way), as well as the *MEA Voice*, *This Active Life*, and the *Michigan Retirement Report*. Members may run for a delegate position in the MEA Representative Assembly (RA), NEA RA, and the NEA RA Retired Annual meeting.

MEA-Retired members regularly join in lobbying efforts at the State Capitol, most recently over plans to give money from school enhancement millages to for-profit charter and cyber schools, along with attempts by Republican lawmakers to allow concealed guns in schools.

Bird and her husband are a regular part of the lobbying contingent, calling on legislators in person to help them understand the dedication and challenges of school employees doing the vital work of educating the next generation. In addition, the Birds



and other retirees across the state hold fundraisers to help MEA-PAC elect friends of public education to state offices.

"How will school districts in Michigan ever attract qualified and dedicated individuals to the field if salary, benefits, and rights continue to be impaired?" she asks. "How will morale in the field ever improve if legislators continue to attack school employees?"

Her husband Bob provides the answer in their skit: "MEA and MEA-Retired members must stand up to billionaire bullies and fight back!" ▼



MEA-Retired
The Commitment Continues

MEA Growing Supports for New Educators

IN OTSEGO COUNTY'S VANDERBILT AREA SCHOOLS, JUST DOWN THE ROAD FROM GAYLORD, TWO NEW TEACHERS WERE HIRED THIS YEAR—WHICH MIGHT NOT SOUND LIKE MANY. BUT IN A SMALL RURAL DISTRICT, THAT NUMBER REPRESENTS 20 PERCENT OF THE TEACHING STAFF.

In the northern Michigan district of 110 students, only a couple of teachers have more than four years of experience in the profession. The lack of veteran educators combined with difficult socioeconomic factors in the community add up to big challenges for new hires.

national level to support new educators and prevent the loss of talented, promising young professionals—too many of whom are leaving the classroom in the first five years out of frustration and burnout.

In Ann Arbor, 510 probationary teachers—including 120 teach-

school district pays for substitute teachers to fill in while the early career educators attend meetings to connect with others and receive professional development.

"Teaching is hard and it can be really isolating," Bell said. "I want them to love teaching as much as I do."

The topics of the meetings are intended to be timely and immediately useful to new practitioners, Bell said, including legal rights and responsibilities, evaluations, community resources and outreach, special education, cultural awareness, teaching ideas and resources, and more.

But there is an important emotional component, as well. "There's a camaraderie that helps them realize they're not alone, they have support, and they have another outlet to get ideas, share and collaborate," Bell said.

Some of the participants present ideas at the meetings and share materials in an online folder accessible to all. Fifth grade teacher Kelsey Lafferty is in her second year of the program, and she says the connection and collaboration with others has been invaluable.

"The sum of our parts is greater than we'll ever be as individuals," Lafferty said.

A similar effort in Walled Lake is drawing record numbers of probationary teachers to attend a New Teacher Club that goes beyond social events to acclimate and connect new members of the association, according to Daryl Szymanski, WLEA president.

The first of five meetings provided an overview of curriculum and instructional practices. Other popular subjects include technology issues and hot topics in special education. The program is a member benefit for WLEA members in good standing,



A New Teacher Club run by the Walled Lake Education Association provides probationary teachers with professional development and connection to colleagues.

A new MEA-NEA pilot project aims to help by providing new educators with mentors who are master teachers. MiNewEd started last year in Cadillac and expanded this year to include MEA offices in Petoskey and Alpena, which serves Vanderbilt.

"The Vanderbilt participants were excited about having a master teacher to assist them and be a resource for them to improve their professional skills," said MEA UniServ Director Deb Larson.

The pilot program joins with other union efforts at the local, state and

ers hired this year—are eligible to participate in monthly new educator meetings, sponsored by the Minority Affairs Team of the Ann Arbor Education Association. Only members in good standing are allowed to attend.

"This is a program created by teachers for teachers," said Tamala Bell, a fourth-grade teacher and chair of the AAEE team responsible for the program. "We tried to create the program we wish had existed for us when we were hired."

The program is so important for recruitment and retention that the



Tamala Bell (left) is one of the Ann Arbor Education Association leaders who run a year-long program to connect and support early career educators. At one recent meeting, second-year participant Christopher Culbertson (right) presented ideas for incorporating Hispanic Heritage Month into the classroom.

who receive credit for state-mandated “New Teacher Induction Hours” for attending.

“All of us are needing to take on some sort of a role in caring for our newest teachers, just because the job is so overwhelming compared to what it was when I started 24 years ago,” Szymanski said.

That was the impetus for members of MEA-Retired to get involved in a separate initiative to support college education majors who are student teaching and belong to the Student MEA. The MEA-Retired Mentoring Program was funded through an NEA grant and launched this fall.


Retirees from across Michigan have volunteered to mentor a student teacher via email and phone. The veterans offer a variety of help: teaching ideas, solutions to classroom problems, and a place to vent that is safe and disconnected from the mentees’ university evaluations.

Colleen Ford, who retired in 2009 from a 38-year teaching career in Flint, said she speaks at least weekly with her mentee—sometimes more. Everything they discuss is confidential. Ford says her job is simply to offer advice for any difficulty that arises during student teaching.

“If they need you, you’re there for them,” Ford said. “I’m just a guide on

the side.”

Student teachers who would like to be assigned a retiree-mentor should contact Rebecca Ernst

at RErnst@mea.org. Members of MEA-Retired who wish to become a mentor can contact Lisa Andros at LAndros@mea.org. 

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One-on-One Organizing Builds MEA Strength

WHEN NICOLE TSCHIRHART LANDED A JOB AT A TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOL FOUR YEARS AGO, SHE HAPPILY LEFT THE FOR-PROFIT CHARTER WHERE SHE HAD WORKED FOR THREE YEARS IN AN UNSUPPORTIVE SETTING SHE CONSIDERED MORE BUSINESS-LIKE THAN NURTURING.

But she didn't immediately join MEA when she started at her new workplace.

She didn't see the value of a union during her first two years teaching kindergarten in West Bloomfield School District—until an incident occurred where she felt a need for back-up in dealing with administrators.

"Nothing major happened, but it made me second-guess my decision not to join," she said. "It was enough that I thought it was important to have support for things that might happen beyond my control."

Tschirhart signed up for membership just over one year ago, and she's never looked back—except to pull in others like her who didn't understand the importance of belonging. By November, she had brought in about 30 new members through a new MEA initiative.

"A lot of new hires don't join the union because they don't know what it has to offer, and nobody has approached them to talk about it," Tschirhart said.

That basic truth is the idea behind MEA's statewide organizing initiative, Get in the Green, which breaks down the process of building our union's

strength into member-led one-on-one conversations at the building level.

The strategy was adapted from an Indiana plan that MEA's 10 field organizers learned about at the Midwest Organizing Summit last June. Named after color coding that labels local units' membership density as red, yellow, or green, Get in the Green launched this fall.

The field organizers were so excited by Indiana's streamlined process, they returned from the summit, sold the plan to MEA leadership, and organized a summer training of 10 members willing to engage new hires in seven locals for eight weeks—in addition to other ongoing efforts.

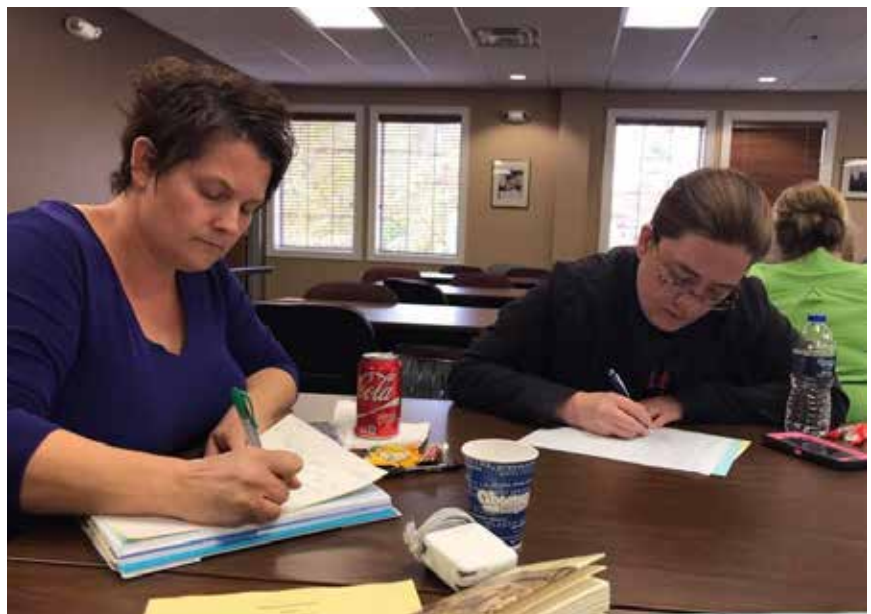
The 10 trainees used Get in the Green strategies to exceed the group's goal of 70 new members in two months. The group signed up 171 new members in July and August, found 85 natural leaders in their locals, and planned 10 events with 582 attendees.

"This is one of the great joys of our work is seeing the fire in the eyes of folks on the ground," said Jessica Lumberas, MEA field organizer.

One-on-one conversations are not new or radical—MEA's organizers, local leaders, and field staff do that work every day. What Get in the Green provides is a step-by-step guide to get more members involved and show them how to talk about membership with employees they know.

Get in the Green explains how to map school buildings to identify natural leaders who are highly respected

Livonia paraeducator Mary Smythe (left) and teacher Anna McGuire work on organizing strategies as part of a new MEA initiative.



MEA's field organizers adapted a new initiative—launched this fall—to tap into and build upon our union's existing strength.

among colleagues and could become more involved. It also provides answers to questions that come up during conversations and ideas for events to bring people together.

"The beauty of it is the simplicity," said Mary Aldecoa, MEA field organizer.

Just as many non-members are never approached to join the union, many existing members are willing to do more to strengthen their locals and get involved in tackling issues—but no one has asked them to help.

MEA staff who've begun Get in the Green trainings say they're finding huge untapped potential in units across the state. It's the definition of organizing forces: the energy already exists for those who can marshal it.

"People are worried about these big issues affecting their locals and their work in the classroom, and they've been waiting for someone to say, 'Come on; let's do this,'" Lumbreras said.

There is strength in numbers.

Bigger numbers mean bigger power for members to have a voice in policymaking or a stronger hand at



the bargaining table. Nobody knows that better than Jamie Pietron-Oldenburg, president of the Anchor Bay Education Association which straddles St. Clair and Macomb counties.

Pietron-Oldenburg marshaled her forces to leverage pay increases this fall after she began organizing around a contract reopener that turned contentious. Through one-on-one contacts, she added members, streamlined dues payment, and increased member involvement.

Teachers wore blue at community events and meetings. They stayed together and stepped up, and the unity decreased the fear of speaking out.

More conversations led to parents and business leaders joining the fight who said they didn't know teachers were locked in a six-year step freeze

while being asked to shoulder huge increases in health care premiums and deductibles.

Soon hundreds were packing into school board meetings. Eventually the two sides settled on a contract that included a 2 percent salary increase and restoration of steps.

Pietron-Oldenburg says individual contact is key to organizing, and it's important to do more listening than talking because people are frustrated and want to be heard. She often followed up with notes of encouragement.

"I did everything I could to restore their dignity and make them feel appreciated, because they didn't feel appreciated by the district," Pietron-Oldenburg said.

Sometimes the work of listening and organizing required out-of-the-box action: "Yes, a broken copier is not a union issue, but if it's going to make someone happy, then I'm going to figure out a way to fix the copier."

Eventually, one conversation at a time, the work pays off. "We're in the green," Pietron-Oldenburg said of her local, "and working together it's like we've got this army in the fight." ▼



Holiday thanks for education employees

THIS HOLIDAY SEASON, I'M THANKFUL FOR A LOT OF THINGS—MY FAMILY AND MY HEALTH, FOR STARTERS. ALSO HIGH UP ON THE LIST ARE THE EDUCATION EMPLOYEES WHO COMPRISE MESSA'S MEMBERSHIP.

As a nonprofit created and governed by school employees, we at MESSA know the tough challenges you face in classrooms, school buildings and bus routes. We also understand that education employees are increasingly stressed emotionally and financially. For many of you, your take-home pay has shrunk over the past decade, while at the same time you've been made to shoulder an increasingly unaffordable share of health care costs, thanks to the state's "hard cap" law.

Despite all this, you show up to classrooms, cafeterias, offices or bus routes each morning, ready to work. Ready to unlock minds, or get kids to school in one piece, or keep buildings clean, or cook the only nutritious meal many children will receive that day.

MESSA provides unmatched personal service because we understand how hard it is to be an education employee today. With so much stress in their lives, we don't want our members to have to worry about health care, too.

If you have any questions—or just need to talk with someone who understands you and your benefits—call our Member Service Center at 800.336.0013. We appreciate you, and we're ready to help. **V**



Ross Wilson
MESSA Executive Director



Calling Artist-Members

MEA members in good standing can submit artwork beginning in late February for an annual art exhibition and sale that results in some pieces being purchased for display at MEA headquarters or regional offices.

For more information and an entry form, go to www.mea.org/Art.

Entries to the 54th Annual MEA/

Michigan Art Education Association (MAEA) Art Acquisitions Purchase Exhibition will be accepted from Feb. 19–March 3, 2018. Works will be accepted from 8 a.m.–5 p.m. on weekdays and from 10 a.m.–noon on Saturday, March 3.

A juror will determine whether each artwork entry is accepted or rejected

into the exhibit. Awards are as follows: 1) Juror's award; 2) MEA purchase awards; 3) MAEA purchase award; 4) Best of Show; 5) Honorable Mention.

The exhibit opens at MEA headquarters in East Lansing on March 5 and continues through April 18, 2018. **V**

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PROFESSIONAL

Waterford bus driver **Becky Lesh** tears up discussing her love for her job, and she shares how the MEA transportation unit she leads beat privatization—for now.

Isn't safety becoming even more important in your job?

It is. There's so many distracted drivers, and so many laws have changed for us as drivers. We now have hazard light stops. We had a four-point system, and now we have an eight-light system. And each of our drivers have a crossing guard hand signal, so the students know, whether they're preschool or seniors, or even life tracks (which is my special needs kids up to age 26), if the hand is closed, they do not cross. When we put our four fingers up, they can cross.

Why should districts think twice about privatizing?

Our drivers live and work in the community, have children here; they're invested. They have a commitment. See, now I'm going to cry. We look out for each other's children, and every child on these buses becomes your child. This is my 14th year, so my original group of kindergarteners are now in their second year of college. When you bring in the outsourced company, they have a lot of turnover. They bring in staff that may live in Lansing or Flint to work for a day or a week if they're short. That individual doesn't know these children. They don't know the area.

Isn't it about money?

In 2015, our district went out for bids and found we were \$500,000 cheaper, so they didn't privatize us. They privatized our custodial and maintenance group through attrition. This year the bids came back that we were \$700,000 to \$1 million cheaper than the private companies, but the superintendent wanted the board to spend that money. They said, 'It's not about money.' We're a district that's been taking money from our employees to stay afloat, and it's not about money?

What was it about?

We had a shortage of drivers. We had nine open runs last year. Sometimes we would be yelled at by a parent because we were 20 minutes late, and the parent didn't know we'd already done our route; now we're out doing somebody else's. The problem was we were being mismanaged. It was a vicious circle of "you're mismanaging, and we're the fall guys." Within a couple weeks of really putting the facts out there, the parents of this community said, "Wait a minute, no."

How do you fix a shortage?

They raised the rate of pay. We were being paid \$14 to \$16.80 an hour, and they raised it to \$17. But another thing I pushed hard on was right-sizing the department. In the last ten years, we lost over 10,000 students. How are we running within 10% of the same number of buses? We used to have 23 elementaries in our heyday, and we're down to nine now, so there should be less buses.

Has the situation improved?

All of our runs are full, and things are working better. But we're still afraid they'll privatize us at the end of the semester. I've been assured by school board members that are supportive that they won't let that happen before next summer. So we're trying to keep the community involved.

What's your advice to drivers in districts that are looking to privatize?

With our school board, I said, "Get involved. Come ride the bus with us. Come talk to us." And we had one board member who did. He took back to the rest of them that it was an eye-opener, that you don't realize what goes into a day's activity. It's not just starting the bus, going out, picking them up, and dropping them off. There's a lot in timing, and there's a lot in how much the drivers know about these children, and how much the children mean to us. ♥



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