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Wayne and Garfield County Insider

Local Curriculum Writer Recognized for Talent, Teaching Ability

In some respects Amy Pace, who was recognized last month by Gary Herbert with the Governor's Medal for Science and Technology, is like any other science teacher in the state high schools. Her teaching load at the on-line Mountain Heights Academy (formerly the Open High School) is comparable to a brick and mortar school, with about 130 biology and 40 chemistry students enrolled in her classes.

One thing that is different is how Amy spends her time. Since her lessons are prepared in advance for on-line delivery, she doesn't spend her days repeating the same lecture to several different class sections. Instead she works individually with each student enrolled in the charter school. Some kids want daily tutoring, others check in every week or two for a progress assessment.

Amy joined the faculty in 2010 when the Mountain Heights Academy began its second year and had grown to offer a 10th grade program. Her first job was to write the curriculum for biology classes.

"I had to learn how to write for on-line classes, where lessons are created for a week at a time, instead of just one a day. Students can access them whenever they choose, and some do it all in one day. I have to make sure the lessons aren't overwhelming or boring, but still get through all the material required by the state standards."

All the resource materials used by the students, including textbooks, are open source. Amy supplements her lessons with open source videos, including ones she records in her own home.

DeLaina Tonks, Director of Mountain Heights Academy, said of Amy's performance, "Amy has successfully transitioned her stellar bricks and mortar teaching experience into the online arena and as a result of her dedication, expertise and best practices is an award-winning curriculum builder and teacher. Her students appreciate her high expectations coupled with accessibility for individual tutoring at Mountain Heights Academy, which netted a 6th in the state ranking based on the end of year state-mandated science tests."

Beginning next fall, Mountain Heights Academy is expanding to include 7th and 8th grades and has recently changed its name from the Open High School to better describe the entire program.

"Amy's role will expand, if anything, as we will add more science teachers and her department will be a bit bigger. She is a delightful professional to work with and has the admiration and respect of all of her colleagues and students," added Tonks.

Students in the charter school come from all over the state of Utah, including five from Garfield and Wayne Counties. About 20% are homeschoolers who want to earn a diploma from a credentialed program with a transcript that may facilitate the college application process. A Utah dancer living in New York City has studied with the program, as have US Ski Team members and an athlete on the professional Dew Tour.

Some kids need the flexible schedules for personal reasons:

“We hate to think there are students who are supporting their families, but there are, and if they need to work in the day, they can study at night to get their degree,” Amy said.

Others are kids who struggled in traditional schools. Amy explained, “Sometimes the classroom dynamic is fun for the student and the teacher but more often it is hard for students because of the peer pressure. We have a lot of students who came because they were bullied, so it’s a good environment for them because it’s one on one.”

As a teacher, Amy likes the independence and absence of office politics. And while the school and parents association organizes field trips and social activities (even a prom!), Amy never has to take tickets for an afterschool sporting event. Discipline problems don’t develop because in the on-line teaching system, the students never have to worry about looking cool.

“Kids and parents choose to come to this school so they are vested in the mission of on-line education,” Amy explained.

Amy was the only 2013 medal recipient working professionally at the K-12 level. Feted in the midst of technology company executives and university professors, she was pleased to see the governor’s program generate interest for delivery of science to the state’s youth. The award ceremony itself was “pretty exciting,” a banquet held at the Children’s Museum in Salt Lake City, with a photo-op with Governor Herbert and entertainment by a rapping scientist wearing a lab coat and safety goggles.

The Governor’s honor isn’t Amy’s first major recognition. In 2009, she traveled to Washington DC for a ceremony in which Barack Obama awarded her the Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching.

Amy was raised in Richfield and studied biology with an intention to teach at Southern Utah University. Amy holds additional credentials for teaching chemistry and physics. She taught at Wayne High School for 10 years, and tried another year at a school in St. George before moving back to Wayne County and diving into the world on remote, on-line employment.

Now living in Bicknell, Amy is married to Jamie Pace and is raising four children. As a family, they enjoy spending summers hunting, camping and hiking.

“We like living in Wayne County, it’s a good place for families. I’m glad I can have a good job and live here; anyone who can is lucky.”