



Success through Teamwork

BY TROY WATKINS

Kristi Luetjen '99, a kindergarten teacher at Whiting Lane Elementary School in West Hartford, Connecticut, has a talent for helping her students realize their unique abilities. Whether it is starting a yoga class for kindergarteners or pulling together a team of professionals to address a student's specific needs, Kristi thinks outside the box to help her students learn. In fact, her unique talents were recognized when she was named the 2010 Connecticut Teacher of the Year, from among the 100,000 teachers in Connecticut.

Whiting Lane has 500 students in pre-kindergarten through Grade 5, and a town-wide program for students with special needs. The students with special needs are mainstreamed into the general classrooms for 80 percent or more of the school day. "A teacher's greatest challenge is that no two students are the same," Luetjen said. "It is so important to know your students, their strengths and weaknesses, what motivates them and how they learn best. Then you have to execute a plan for their learning that is developmentally appropriate and engaging. It is a difficult balancing act that teachers face daily."

"I believe in building strong relationships with my students and their families, as well as with my colleagues," said Luetjen. "I think it is incredibly important to work as a team to develop the whole child. Each child is special and all children can learn."

Luetjen works with special education professionals, pathologists, therapists, the school social worker and psychologist to enable each student to achieve his or her potential. "We meet students where they are and help them to grow," she said.

"Standardized testing isn't the best measure of what students know and can do," stated Luetjen. "I am encouraged by recent trends away from standardization towards personalization in education. School is so much more than filling in bubble sheets and memorizing facts. It is part of a teacher's job to create caring, competent people who are able to productively contribute to society. I want my students to be smart and I want them to be good people."

Looking for additional methods to reach, connect with and develop all her students, Luetjen introduced yoga to her special needs students and expanded the program to all kindergarteners. "Research tells us that yoga practice positively affects students learning," she explained. "There are physical benefits such as improved strength, coordination and motor planning abilities. Yoga also helps children learn better impulse control and has been shown to improve attention and focus, which is so important in a kindergarten classroom."

Approaching situations with an open mind and seeking solutions that integrate a variety of perspectives are some of the intangible benefits of Luetjen's liberal arts education at Assumption. While Luetjen majored in history and political science, she also took classes in

philosophy, psychology, social and rehabilitation services, and education. "Teachers have to know a great deal about many different subjects, as well as concentrate in a core subject area," said Luetjen. But she didn't graduate from Assumption with a plan to be a teacher.

She started her career as an applied behavior analysis therapist for children with autism and then decided to enroll in a master's program in early childhood special education at St. Joseph's College in West Hartford at night. Luetjen decided to teach young children because "I believe strongly that it is through the emotional and intellectual nurturing of our youngest children that our world is most positively affected. I wanted to make the biggest difference in their lives."

"I believe in building strong relationships with my students and their families, as well as with my colleagues. I think it is incredibly important to work as a team to develop the whole child. Each child is special and all children can learn."

—Kristi Luetjen '99

Upon earning her M.A., she was hired by the West Hartford Public Schools in 2002 and was a preschool special education teacher until 2006, when she transitioned to kindergarten.

Perhaps Luetjen's defining characteristic is her ability to overcome challenges. She was the first in her family to attend college. She went to graduate school at night while working full-time. And in 2007, she faced her greatest challenge to date – she was diagnosed with breast cancer and continued to teach part-time while undergoing treatments. Then she turned her personal crisis into an opportunity to help others. She organized "Team Kristi," which has raised nearly \$15,000 for Susan G. Komen for the Cure [of breast cancer].

Luetjen's life has taken some unexpected turns. When she originally decided to attend Assumption, she was nervous and unsure of her direction. She found the small and intimate campus as a good fit for her. "I thrived at Assumption," she said. "The small classes and the dedicated professors helped me reach my potential." Now, she is paying it forward. ❖

Kristi Luetjen '99

Kindergarten teacher, Whiting Lane Elementary School, West Hartford, CT



2010
Connecticut
Teacher
of the Year

PHOTO: DAN VAILLANCOURT