

Reaching Out: Q and A with the 2018 National Teacher of the Year

Mandy Manning

Ferris High School



Mandy Manning is the 2018 National Teacher of the Year. Mandy started her career in education as a para-educator in a Designed Instruction classroom in Shelton, WA in 1998. She achieved teacher certification in Texas in 2003. Currently, as an English language learning educator, Mandy is the first teacher for refugee and immigrant students at Joel E. Ferris High School in the Newcomer Center in Spokane. Her passion is making connections with her students and their families, and taking those connections out into her school and into the Spokane community. She strives to ensure her students feel welcome, wanted, and loved, and works to instill in them the belief that they are worthy of every success and happiness they dream of in life. Mandy urges all those she encounters to seek experiences

Responses have been edited for clarity and length.

WAESOL Educator Editor (WEE): First of all, thank you very much for giving us this opportunity to interview you. Really, we are very proud to have you here at WAESOL 2018 at Renton Technical College.

Mandy Manning (MM): Yes, of course. Thank you.

WEE: Can you tell us something about the school where you teach and where your students come from?

MM: I teach in the Newcomer Center, which is a specialized English language development program housed at Ferris High School in Spokane, Washington. It's a program specifically for brand-new, high school aged immigrant and refugee students who are just beginning to learn English. They stay a semester with me, sometimes a year; it just depends on the level of support they need and amount of formal education they had prior to coming to the United States. We teach foundations of English language, but more importantly we help them in their transition to living and studying in the United States. That's really our main purpose.

WEE: How and when did you decide to be a high school teacher?

MM: Well, it's really funny because I didn't know that I was going to be a teacher. Then, when I was in Armenia, I was teaching in the Peace Corps. I taught mostly elementary school

outside of their understanding, to be fearless, to be kind, and to build relationships rather than fences. Mandy lives with her husband and three children in Spokane, Washington.

students. Even after the Peace Corps, I still wasn't convinced I would be a teacher. I think it's because I hadn't quite found my level yet.

When I moved to Texas, I was able to get a position as a high school teacher. I discovered these are the kids I want to work with because teenagers are so funny, right? They really think that they know what's going on and that they're living life, but there's still so much ahead of them. I love that opportunity to help them believe in themselves because I think little kids automatically kind of believe in themselves. As you get older, you start to question your own abilities and lose confidence. You have the sense that you don't fit in, and before I taught English language learners, I tended to teach kids who didn't quite fit in. I love giving them a home place and helping them to believe in themselves and gain confidence because they're going to be our future.

I just love teaching teenagers. They are hilarious, and you can talk to them--not like adults, but almost like an adult. You can be very honest, and you don't have to do anything cute. So, you just treat them with respect and just be honest.

WEE: As you know, we all have someone who inspires us. Who, in your life, inspired you to get this job, to be a teacher, and to be loved by your students so much?

MM: I had two people, really. My aunt Carol, who I went down to Texas to be with after I left the Peace Corps, is really the reason that I'm an educator. She is the one who really pushed me to be a teacher because she saw me work with some kids in a summer theater camp, and she was like, "Man, what are you doing? You need to be a teacher." I didn't believe I could, and she was like, "You can." So because she believed in me, I related to that.

Also, my seventh-grade teacher, Ms. Baker; of course she didn't know this at the time, but she taught me that, truly, it's not about what you teach, it's about how you connect with kids. She believed in me without even knowing who I was from the moment I walked into her room. The first time I was the lead teacher in a classroom, and not in the Peace Corps, but in here in United States, in Texas with my kids, I remembered that, and

I was like, “Okay. Every kid is someone that has potential, and they need to see that on my face and in my actions from the moment they meet me.” Miss Baker from Star King Middle School in Carmichael, California inspired me, too. She knew what true teaching was, and it was making connections and believing in kids. Students are very smart; they immediately figure out what kind of teacher is teaching them.

WEE: Is there anything that you did in your first days of teaching that you regret? What advice do you have for the new or inexperienced teachers?

MM: I'm so glad this happened in my very first year as the lead classroom teacher because I learned from it. The biggest issue for teachers is classroom management training, and I hadn't had any formal education in being a teacher. When I was a teacher for the first year, I had a mentor teacher who helped me a lot. Because I just instinctively, and based on what I learned from Ms. Baker, I really connected with my kids, I didn't have a whole lot of discipline issues or a lot of behavior problems. Every once in a while, I did because I taught theater, and kids often thought it was fun time.

I would have to keep the kids super busy all the time and focused, but every once in a while, we'd be doing a unit where they had to have some independent work time, and then I had a couple boys of who would get super squirrely. One day, I just got really irritated and I wasn't thinking. I told one of the kids, “If you would just stop acting like an idiot, we can get on...” and in that moment, like the words came out of my mouth, and I immediately was like, “That was a huge mistake.”

The air went out of the room; everyone went quiet, and that kid was never the same. He was never the same because we had a family. We had a community. We have a safe environment, and in me saying that one just offhand remark, that, of course, I did not intend. He wasn't really an idiot, but he had no more trust. There was no more trust with that kid, and there wasn't anything that I could do. I tried, of course, to repair and fix, and you can't. The words are out, and you can't take them back.

I do know that that kid went on and was successful, but it could have derailed his entire high school path and on, you know?

That was such a strong lesson because messages matter, and it's in what we say, and it's in how we act. We have to take care because we mean so much to our kids, our students. Sometimes we're the consistent adult in their life and everything that comes out of our mouth has to be intentional and helping them to believe in themselves. When I told him he needed to stop acting like an idiot, that's all he needed to hear from me for him to think he knew what I believed about him. I'm so thankful that happened in my first year because I guarantee I never did that again. And so, for new teachers, your messages matter and you have to be very careful about what you're communicating to your kids and that is in everything that you do. If you're rephrasing things to make them easier, you're communicating to kids that they're not capable. You should be doing something to help them understand the more difficult language. When you're teaching them, everything you do and say is communicating to them what their ability is, whether you know it or not. And so, we have to be very intentional what kind of an environment we are creating. Is it an asset environment, where we're having belief in every kid's strength and potential, or are we targeting things that we believe kids can't do? Because that's going to be very important. Everything we do and say communicates to a kid who they are, and if they belong, and if they matter, and if they can do something. We have to believe that every kid can.

WEE: Can you tell us something about one of your favorite lessons to teach? Why this lesson and how did you teach it?

MM: Well it's the one I always talk about because it's so fun. I do a map-making project. It's about giving and receiving directions; that's the language of it. But it's so experiential and that is what I love because I like to get kids out of the classroom--I think mostly because I also like to get out of the classroom. It's an opportunity to expose the kids to the world outside of the classroom--and real life--to give context to the language that we're using and learning, to show them that everything that we do in class connects to our everyday lives. We get to go and we also connect it back to their own experience because they're creating a visual of their community before they came to this current community. Whatever that community was before, they're sharing them with each other, so they're learning about one another. They're

connecting. They're finding commonalities and differences and exploring who each other is.

And then, they're connecting that to their life right now, which is really important because it's stays really positive, too. Sometimes when we work with English language learners and immigrants and refugees, we can make them relive some things that are very traumatic, so then their memory is negative. But this is an opportunity to be positive and to share something about their community that they love. Because we all love our homes, certainly, and we miss them. Then you share that with one another, and then you connect it to look at our new home and look at what where we live. Then we try to navigate that and interact with people in our new home. It's my favorite lesson, so I talk about it all the time.

WEE: It seems you advocate for involving community members from different positions and levels to visit your class and mingle with your students. How does that help in the learning process and support the success of what you're doing?

MM: Well, of course, at the very basic level, it gives kids practice using English, but more importantly it gives students access to individuals that they wouldn't normally have access to. I would say even more important are the community members and how it impacts them. It's easy to see the people living in your community and to just operate in your own personal circle, to do the things that you normally do, and not realize that there's so much beauty and difference and how amazing and important that is. So really, I do it for my kids, but it's not necessarily for the learning of my students. It's for the learning of the community members from different levels. Yes, we do we have legislators, and we have district level administrators, and we have, of course, our own administrators in the classroom. We bring other classes in. We do have advisers. We've had community advocates who have come in, and we have just regular people who want to volunteer, or anybody who wants to come in.

My kids are so used to it. We have a parade of people all the time. But the idea is not just, "Hey, come in and check it out." You're going to interact, sit down with the students, talk to them, listen to them, and interact and learn about them,

recognize not just their difference, but that they're an asset and look at what they're providing our community.

I think there's also these ideas of hierarchy and things like that. When you sit down with someone and realize their humanity, that we're the same, just because you hold the position of power, we can still communicate and work together to impact one another. That is so important because everybody, legislators included, they're regular people who just happen to have this position. That's such a good lesson for my kids, and it's a good lesson for the community members.

WEE: In most of your previous interviews and speeches, you talk about students' fears and uncertainty about many things happening in their lives. So, how do you address that in class?

MM: They They have this kind of feeling, this kind of fear about what is going on in our country, and a lot is going on in our nation that it makes our students fearful. I remember right after the election with the kids coming in and wondering when they were going to have to leave, and, of course, we have students who're waiting for family members and they still don't get to have their family members come, or they're afraid family members will have to leave and that makes a lot of trauma all the time.

So, the solution is not as difficult as difficult as it would appear because it's like, "Oh we have to change the world," and we do. I mean, of course we need to change hearts and minds, but the real solution is to ensure that the students know they're welcome and that we are happy they are here and we will do everything in our power to ensure that that safety and security they feel here will not change because they have a whole team of advocates and people who love them. So, really, it's as simple as being welcoming and showing how happy we are and ensuring that when they're at school, they're surrounded by people who love and care about them, and they're safe.

WEE: What's next for you after your time as Teacher of the Year ends?

MM: I will just keep going. Go back to my plan, work with my kids, right? With this opportunity I also have new

responsibility. I think that yes, I'll go back to the classroom, but I have an obligation to never stop advocating. I have to continue writing. I have to continue speaking. I have to continue working on a project to communicate how important students are--not only immigrants and refugee students, but all students. We need to be welcoming and supportive of all kids, but especially for immigrant and refugee students who bring beauty and diversity and different ways of thinking, being, and doing that we need in order to progress as a society. We need to just continue to humanize humans, which is terrible that we have to do that. So, I'll be teaching, but I will never stop advocating and speaking up and using my position because yes, I'm the 2018 National Teacher of the Year. I have an obligation to continue to use that to help kids.

WEE: How do professional conferences, such as the annual WAESOL conference, help in the success of our students? What message do you have for *WAESOL Educator* and its readers?

MM: Number one, for educators, it helps us to have a community together and just feel like we belong to something bigger. Teachers can often feel like they're operating in the night, you know, in isolation. Going to conferences and meeting like-minded people is very empowering because you don't feel alone and ultimately, as a human, that's all we want. We want to feel like we belong, so coming together for common purposes is very important.

Second, it's an opportunity to share what you do and what works for you, and then I share what works for me, and we learn from each other. That's so important because you have to sit down and learn from each other and understand that you bring things to the table that are going help me. We all bring things to the table, so it's an opportunity to learn from one another and to utilize those things that I've learned in my classroom.

Finally, it's important because we're focused on the most the important thing together. We're focused on students and meeting their needs, and it's an opportunity to fully, one hundred percent, focus on the most important thing, which is the kids.

Click [Here](#) to Return to the Table of Contents