

READING TO GROW

Life-changing educator Mechelle Craig shares her love of reading and the English language with Katy Junior High's seventh-grade students

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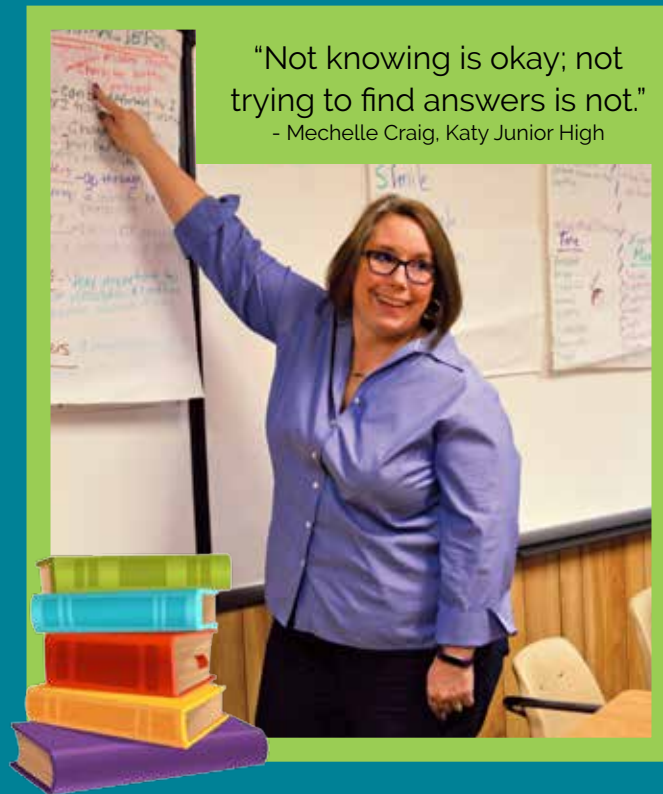
Craig helps her students grow by showing them their true potential



Like many older siblings, Mechelle Craig schooled her little sister at her knee with a chalkboard, but she didn't see that as her vocation. Despite her father's suggestion to study teaching in college, Craig earned degrees in sociology and management. Still, teaching called to her. When her youngest daughter of three turned 5, she returned to school and fully embraced her inner teacher, earning a master's degree in education. Substitute teaching turned into a permanent position when Craig joined Katy Junior High (KJH) in 2005 and never left.

Moving Toward Greatness

Craig grew up in Houston, and when the opportunity arose, she made her way back to the area, specifically Katy, for its fine reputation. "Twenty years ago, Old Katy was almost idyllic - something you'd see in a movie or on TV - like Mayberry," she says. It was a welcome change from the big city of Dallas. Her husband and three daughters reveled in the familial feeling and the way the whole town turned out for high school football games. "It was a safe, fun place with a great atmosphere," she reminisces. "Even if you didn't know everyone, you felt as though you did through friendly connections."



Building the Basis for Learning

That hometown sentiment has carried over in her career. Craig teaches seventh grade reading in addition to academic, pre-AP, and gifted and talented pre-AP English. She enjoys focusing on the classics and Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* has remained steadfast on her list, and over the years the kids have consistently resisted its challenging Victorian English. She coaches them through turns of phrase and ensuing cultural lessons. The story is foundational to so many others that came later, and she tells them, "Stay with

me, and you'll recognize the themes in future tales and scenes." Craig uses her enthusiasm to show students the way forward to build the basis for learning.

A True Educator

Principal Jacob LeBlanc shares her zeal. "Mrs. Craig is a true leader. She has been a long-term Tiger and serves in many different ways. She has sponsored the cheerleaders and currently serves as a department chair for English Language Arts. She is an asset to both KJH and Katy ISD."

"Mrs. Craig is what I consider a true educator," affirms eighth grade Principal Rahn Beaty. "When you are conversing with her, you quickly realize that her focus is always on the kids and their success."

Pushing them to seek knowledge, Craig trains them to become lifelong learners. "Education continues to change, but in reality, my role is to grow the child to the next level," she says. "Not knowing is okay; not trying to find answers is not." The curriculum is rigorous, especially at the advanced level. Those students are self-driven, and Craig acts as facilitator, whether the day's activities call for autonomous or cooperative study.

Helping Them Grow

Seventh graders are variable, with a great deal of chemistry going on inside of them. "They are independent one day and in tears the next," she shares. Craig remains approachable, warm, and even goofy with them, treating them as her own children. She also finds them hilarious in turn - sometimes, they are funny on purpose, and other times, they amuse her without realizing it. "Kids are open-minded, and the most important thing is to show them that everything I do is to help them grow - to see the point in learning." KM

GAIL G. COLLINS has written authored three books on life abroad, believing writing is the best excuse to talk to strangers.