

Cami Carlson - Carbon School District Teacher of the Year

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Carlson with her Utah Teacher of the Year plaque at the awards program.

The reason Carlson, an English and history teacher at Carbon High School and College of Eastern Utah class of 1998, won the 2018 Carbon School District's Teacher of the Year award is her bona fide kindness. Though she shies from accolades, she draws recognition because she reaches out personally to every teen who enters her classroom. It is life changing.

The Secret

"I just show that I'm interested in them and have genuine conversations with them about what they care about. For me, especially lately, it is about finding the kids and meeting them where they are instead of forcing them to be where I want them to be," Carlson said.

Her conversations with students include infinite topics: theater, scientific theories, sports, clothing brands, art, books, movies and shoes. To high school students, it is irrelevant what the topic is because what they see and hear is a teacher making an effort to connect.

Caring sounds like a natural concept, but with over 100 students, secondary teachers struggle to connect with individuals. Carlson puts in the effort to know each person she teaches and to give them a reason to look forward to school. The small things that make a big difference to students, like knowing every student's name after the first day.

"Cami's kids know that she cares, especially those who have a hard time making connections, or are hard to get along with. Sometimes she has to work really hard, but she finds a way.

It might take a whole school year, but she does it," Chelsa Roberts, Carlson's best friend, said.

A Fierce Guard

To set a standard, Carlson makes it clear that she has no tolerance of students putting each other down, and if they do, she will permanently dismiss them from class. Her little corner of the world is a safe place and she guards it fiercely.

Before every class, she stands outside her classroom and welcomes everyone. This might look like a nice motion; however, it is also her way of making sure that the halls stay safe. To her, fighting is just another form of putting someone down. However big or strong the kids are, when she shows up, the fight is over.

That is how Carlson has always been. She has a strong sense of the innate worth of every person- especially the underdog. One time when Cami and her mother, Diane, CEU class of 1976, were driving home from a parade, Carlson stopped the car and jumped out to protect a kid who was surrounded by a group of bullies.

Her father, Steve Carlson, CEU class of 1976, reminisced about when Carlson was in middle school, she came home with bruises and a black eye. A student attacked a teacher - Carlson stepped in to stop her peer and took the brunt of the beating.

Robert Potts, Cami's grandfather, influenced her outlook on life. He grew up in Price's melting pot with Italians, Greeks, Slovenians and Japanese. Laboring at the coke ovens (near Sunnyside, Utah) and the coal mine, Potts was side-by-side with workers who did not look or talk like him - and he loved it.

"When I was a kid, he told us stories about his friends from all over the world. He taught me that everyone has much to offer, especially people who are different from me," Carlson said. She believes that different perspectives

are an important part of our shared history and if we don't listen to other people's stories, we will lose our own identity.

Stop? Never

Some might assume Carlson is a softie, but she combines compassion with a crazy work ethic. Carlson can push her students because she exerts herself equally as hard. Robin Hussey, vice principal at Carbon High, said, "She is not teacher that works from 8 to 3:30. She is working hard on weekends and evenings. She digs deep and wants kids to think deeply." |

From the first bell to the last bell, her students know that it is time to work. Even though her students metaphorically punch-in and put in a hard hour and a half, they are able to punch-out, while Carlson never punches out.

It's a Competition

Tammy Pope-Rigert, a teacher in a neighboring classroom, describes Carlson as extremely competitive - with herself, "She is constantly pushing herself to create something amazing for her students. In return, her students want to perform well."

Her lessons are fast paced and full of variety. One day, history students find their desks on the sides in rows to simulate trenches that soldiers fought in during World War I. The next class might be analyzing a rock song to learn about poetry, or create an art project. The mixture of activities is inspired by Carlson's love of learning.

"I Loved CEU"

It was Carlson's dream to play on the court as an Eagle; while she was growing up, her parents took the family to nearly every CEU men's and women's ball games. The dream came true when she played as a guard for CEU from 1996-98. She led the conference most of her sophomore year for the best three-point-field-goal percentage and earned Most Improved Award her sophomore year. Most importantly, the team gave her a place to be herself.

"I had some really fun teammates. We were together all of the time on and off the court. We made some lasting friendships," she said.

In her college classes, Carlson was competitive in academics. She knew she wanted to be a teacher and her professors in English and history catalyzed her growth.

"I loved CEU. English professor's Curtis and Carrie Icard had a passion for literature and taught me how to interpret it. Carrie shared her love of women's literature with me," Carlson said.

After graduation, Carlson continued her education at Southern Utah University where she earned her bachelor's degree in English and history. She returned home to Price and taught in the Carbon School District since. The main reason she returned to her roots, she said, is to be close to family.

100 Percent Family First

Family occupies the No. 1 spot in Carlson's heart; her parents are a major part of who she is as a person and professional. They are hard working, relentless, humble, supportive and accepting; they are proud of each other, their children and grandchildren.

"Through their example, they taught me by showing me instead of telling me. They love me unconditionally and taught me to love," she said.

Students at school are adopted into her extended family. Even though she is an amazing teacher, academics will not be her sole legacy.

"Any kind of interaction with Cami Carlson makes you a better person, Roberts said.

~ Jon Banasky & Renee Banasky