

Former NCO Named DoD Education Activity Teacher of the Year

By Meghan Portillo, NCO Journal

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Former NCO and 2017 DODEA Teacher of the Year Kelisa Wing shows students the best websites to research the locations of their parents' past deployments. (Photo courtesy of DOD Education Activity)

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Former NCO Kelisa Wing has brought the leadership skills she gained in the Army into her classroom at Fort Benning, Georgia. Faith Middle School's students and teachers are inspired every day by Wing, who has been named the 2017 Department of Defense Education Activity Teacher of the Year.

Wing has known she wanted to be a teacher since she was 16 years old. She was a camp counselor, and was faced with two feuding sixth-grade girls. The girls had been rivals for quite some time, but Wing sat them down and encouraged them to talk to each other, one at a time.

"I was surprised, because I wasn't much older than them, but they were listening to me, and they actually became friends afterward," Wing said. "I found that it was very natural for me to talk to older children who are sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders. I just felt like I had found my calling. I came home from camp and told my mother that I wanted to be a teacher. She told me teachers don't make a lot of money, but it didn't matter to me because I knew that I had made a difference."

Wing said her mother instilled in her a drive to pursue her education and make something of herself. She knew an education was her key to a brighter future.

"Pursue it and do it' is something my mother would always tell me," Wing said. "She was a single mother, and I watched her go to school at night and eventually become a registered nurse. She was a wonderful example of perseverance and tenacity. That is really what is at the core of me. My mother would always say, 'You can do anything you set your mind to. There are no barriers. There are no limits except the ones you create for yourself.'"

Today, those same encouraging words are the ones Wing passes on to her students. Each year, she leads a career project with the eighth-graders at Faith Middle School. The project, with a motto of “Pursue it and do it, building a team to fulfill your dream,” leads the students through a five-step process. They define their goals, research their options, collaborate with others, talk about their dreams with the people important to them, and then execute.

“I believe you can do anything you set your mind to,” Wing said. “This is what I teach my students.”

Working at DODEA

The DOD Educational Activity plans, directs, coordinates and manages pre-kindergarten through 12th-grade education programs for children of Department of Defense personnel who would otherwise not have access to high-quality public education. DODEA schools are in Europe, the Pacific, Western Asia, the Middle East, Cuba, Guam, Puerto Rico and the United States. DODEA also provides support and resources to educational agencies throughout the United States that serve the children of military families.

Wing has been teaching for five years, but she has been working for DODEA for 10. She started as a substitute teacher while stationed with her husband in Germany. She then worked as an educational aide, a secretary and finally an administrative officer before starting her student teaching.

“When I made that transition from being a Soldier to being an Army spouse, I knew I wanted to be an educator, and I just wanted to be close to it, no matter what,” Wing said. “So I worked in support positions just to be around children and be a part of the educational system.”

Wing’s principal, Joan Islas, has known her for eight of the 10 years she has worked for DODEA.

“When I met her, she was an administrative officer, and that position focuses on facilities, transportation, the logistical support of the building,” Islas said. “She really stood out to me because she took such a great interest in the students, in their families. That is not usually a focus for an administrative officer. Her interest, concern and love for the children and the community was amazing to see. I have seen her grow into this teaching position, but her care and concern for these kids and their families has really never changed.”

Wing said that though she has always enjoyed working for DODEA, her current teaching position is her favorite. She especially loves working with eighth-graders, because it is a sensitive time in the students’ lives during which she can have a great impact.

“I have student-taught 11th and 12th grade, and I found that by the time students hit the 12th grade, and I hate to say it, but it was too late,” she said. “We had kids who didn’t have enough credits. They had to make a decision whether they wanted to pursue a GED or take extra night-time or online classes. So to me, eighth grade is a vital time in the life of a child. They are getting ready to go to high school, and everything in high school matters. You have to be there, be focused. So we really try to build those skills here, before high school. We can’t stress to them enough the importance of their education and building good study skills, taking ownership of their education. I want it bad for them. Dr. Islas wants it bad for them. But they have got to want it. They have to do what they have to do to be successful.”

NCO skills in the classroom

Wing enlisted in the Army right out of high school in 1999 to get money for college. She worked as a 42F human resources information system management specialist, and was promoted to the rank of sergeant after three years.

“I always had this drive,” Wing said. “Not just for me, but whatever I was going to do, I wanted to do my very best in it so I could show my Soldiers that example.”

When she was a young staff sergeant stationed at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, she was the NCO in charge of the electronic military personnel office with about 30 Soldiers under her care.

Wing recalled a sergeant major asking her during her board for promotion to the rank of staff sergeant, “What is more important, the accomplishment of the mission or the welfare of your Soldiers?”

She said she knew he was expecting her to say the mission is most important, but she replied, “If I don’t take care of my Soldiers, the mission will never be accomplished.”

Wing said she wouldn’t trade her experience in the Army for anything, because it has shaped her into the educator she is today. The leadership skills she developed as an NCO transfer into the classroom and help her create an environment of respect for her students.

“I know that my mission as an educator is to educate, engage and empower students. That is always in the forefront of my mind. I will never quit on any child. The more challenging the situation, the more excited it makes me because I’m like, ‘We are going to get this done. We are going to get you from good to great.’ Defeat is not in my vocabulary, and I believe that every setback is an opportunity for a comeback. So I will never accept defeat. I will never leave a fallen comrade. In the military we never leave anyone behind, and in my classroom, I will never leave a child behind. Everybody is going to be successful.

“I am very proud to have been a part of the corps of noncommissioned officers, just as I am proud to be a teacher. I take that pride, and I take it into my classroom every single day.”

Relating to the kids

Wing said working with children is more difficult than working with Soldiers, because she doesn't have Army regulations to back her up in the classroom. But learning to connect with her Soldiers and earn their respect has helped her to do the same with her students.

"I have got to connect with these kids in a personal way, and I have to earn their trust, or they are never going to open up their minds for me," she said.

Wing relates so well to her students, Islas said, because she understands military life. All of the students at Faith Middle School live on post at Fort Benning, and Wing's experiences as a Soldier and as an Army spouse allow her to empathize with any challenges they face.

"She understands the life and the responsibility of the military child," Islas said. "They really wear the uniform as well as the parent. They have to move, go into new communities, be flexible, be resilient. Their bodies and minds are changing, and they have to adapt and adjust in new ways while still being responsible. Kelisa understands that. She holds them to extremely high expectations while helping them through times of transition with a lot of kindness and patience."

The entire school has benefited from Wing's empathetic approach. Two years ago, Wing created a schoolwide program to address students' social and emotional needs. The program's acronym, STAR, stands for stop, teach, affect and reach. More than 500 staff members and students make time every Friday to talk for 10 minutes. They talk about the life skills the students will need to prepare for change or to resolve conflicts. The program is designed to build the kids' resiliency and self-reliance by showing them that their teachers are available and eager to help them attain their goals.

"The STAR program was her initiative, and it has been very successful here," Islas said. "It gets teachers and students to connect and know about each other on a personal level. It addresses the whole child, which is extremely important because there is more to our kids than just the academic side. Oftentimes kids — especially military kids — are going through things at home and we want them to feel connected, a part of our community, that this is a safe place for them to come, and that we care about them and their families."