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## MAT GRADUATES WIN TOP TEACHING HONOR

## TWO NAMED TEACHERS OF THE YEAR BY LOCAL DISTRICT

by [Kelli Caplan](#) | May 9, 2024*Above: Kali Milazzo, '21 and Hannah Park, '19**Read time: about 4 min*

Two graduates of the [Master of Arts in Teaching](#) (MAT) program have quickly ascended to the top of their field, as they were each recently named Teacher of the Year in their Newport News schools.

Hannah Park, '19, and Kali Milazzo, '21, received the top award given to teachers by the school district for the 2023-24 school year. Park teaches English as a Second Language (ESL) at Menchville High School and Milazzo teaches second grade at Discovery STEM Academy.

Park and Milazzo are the latest in a long line of MAT graduates to win Teacher of the Year honors in districts across Virginia.

"Having our graduates recognized as Teachers of the Year is a testament to the groundwork laid by their MAT program preparation as well as their own commitment to continued growth as licensed teachers," said Dr. Jean Filetti, Professor of English and Director of Teacher Preparation. "Both Hannah and Kali's success is well deserved. They have gone on to be exemplary teachers recognized for their expertise."

Park and Milazzo each received their bachelor's degree in English from CNU before pursuing their MAT.

Being named Teacher of the Year for their respective schools is proof of their effectiveness and success in the classroom. Both expressed surprise at receiving the recognition.

“When I found out I won Teacher of the Year, I was extremely shocked and honored,” Park said. “It’s very humbling to be recognized as Teacher of the Year, and also difficult because I work with so many incredible teachers who I wish could be recognized in the same regard.”

Milazzo said “it was one of those moments you don’t forget.”

“I was completely shocked and very emotional when my administration, parents, and fiancé came into my classroom on a random Friday morning and surprised me with flowers and balloons to announce it,” she said.

Both Milazzo and Park have taught in Newport News Public Schools since graduating. And they both knew from an early age that they wanted to be teachers. Their reasons for wanting to be in the classroom are different, but they both have a passion for what they do and helping to shape young people.

Milazzo comes from a family focused on education and public service. Her mother worked for 30 years with children and families in foster care before becoming a kindergarten instructional assistant.

“I was raised in a home that encouraged me to pursue my passions and modeled how to consider others before myself, so I saw teaching as a natural path to nurture that love of helping others,” she said.

In high school, Milazzo volunteered at her former elementary school.

“When I stepped into the second grade classroom for the first time and interacted with the young students, it was like a switch flipped and I knew what I wanted to do with my career,” she said.

Park recounted a similar aha moment that led her into the classroom. When she was in eighth grade, her English class read an excerpt from a biography of a woman who traveled to the United States from another country with her family when she was a young girl.

“The short reading detailed the challenges she faced when she enrolled in the local elementary school where English was the primary language and she did not speak or understand the word of it. She wrote about the isolation she felt being the only English learner in the room, how much she wished she could learn English to understand what was being taught in class,” she said.

When she got home that day, she said, she was “absolutely furious with what I had read.”

“Sitting at the dinner table with my mom later that evening, I shared with her how it made me feel. Her response was, ‘Okay. What are you going to do about it?’ That was when I decided to pursue a career as an ESL teacher,” she said.

The MAT Program transformed Parks’ and Milazzo’s hopes of becoming teachers into reality. It prepared them well, they said, for the classroom.

“I had some really excellent mentors and professors that cared about me while in the MAT program and pushed me to be the type of educator my students need,” Milazzo said.

Park agreed, saying, “The professors, supervisors, and cooperating teachers in the MAT program did an amazing job preparing me for teaching ESL.”

“The MAT program does an incredible job ensuring their candidates are prepared to enter the world of education. I would not be the teacher I am today without the instruction the MAT program provided,” Park said.

The MAT program, Filletti said, is “grounded in solid pedagogical theory with field experience embedded in coursework and a mentored 14-week internship, ensuring our graduates enter their careers with real-world preparation.”

Both Park and Milazzo love what they are doing and are constantly striving to be the best they can be for their students. It’s far from easy, they said, but worth all of the effort.

“Teaching is the most important job there is,” Milazzo said. “It’s a lot of hard work, and if you care, it’s even harder. I would tell potential teachers that being a teacher is something to be extremely proud of and wear like a badge of honor when people ask what you do.”

Park said being a teacher is “equally exhausting as it is rewarding.” “Teaching allows you to really make an impact and see growth not only in your students but in yourself as well,” she said.

As the school year draws to a close, Park and Milazzo are taking stock of how they have changed and how they will continue to build on their acumen in the classroom so they can come back as even better teachers next year.

“I’ve learned that I’m a lot stronger and more capable than I ever gave myself credit for back in grad school,” Milazzo said. “I’ve learned that asking for help and seeing out opportunities to grow are strengths and make for a more well-rounded educator.”

For Park, “my goals are to grow as a teacher and do my best to support my students and fellow colleagues.

“It is a privilege to work with high school students and be a part of their educational journeys,” she said. “A very prominent goal right now is to help several of our senior English learners make it to the finish line and graduate in June. I have every confidence that they will be successful.”

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