

THE DAYTONA BEACH NEWS-JOURNAL

HOME OF THE WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS BEACH / Coastal Edition

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 17, 2021

News-Journalonline.com \$2



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Civics teacher Allison Sheridan, dressed as King George, one of her many costumes she uses in class, Thursday October 14, 2021 at Heritage Middle School. PHOTOS BY DAVID TUCKER/NEWS-JOURNAL

Civics teacher at Heritage Middle makes history come alive

By Cassidy Alexander
Daytona Beach News-Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Amazing Teachers: About this series

» As part of an effort to honor the work of teachers in Volusia and Flagler counties, The News-Journal and All Aboard Storage are sharing stories of educators who have made an impact on students' lives with a different story each month.

» Go to news-journalonline.com to see more stories about inspiring teachers in Volusia and Flagler counties.

» To nominate a teacher, visit news-journalonline.com/contests.

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Heritage Middle School civics teacher Allison Sheridan checks in with Nevaeh Lewis and Kenneth Roman, Thursday October 14, 2021 as the class moves around the room working at different stations during class. DAVID TUCKER/NEWS JOURNAL



Civics teacher Allison Sheridan, dressed as King George, one of her many costumes she uses in class, Thursday October 14, 2021 at Heritage Middle School. DAVID TUCKER/NEWS JOURNAL

Allison Sheridan stood in front of her classroom at Heritage Middle School in a crown and cape. For a moment, she's not one of Heritage Middle's civics teachers — she's King George III.

"So last week we broke up with Great Britain," she started, reminding her students where they left off last in their own words. What's the difference, really, between the end of a relationship and the end of a regime? It's a welcome break for the

seventh graders to hear her put it that way. Sure, they can define "sovereignty" and "consent of the governed," but sometimes it's nice to think of a complicated topic in words that are already familiar to them.

Introducing their lesson for the day, Sheridan puts things in context for them again: "The Articles of Confederation kind of sucks."

And with that, she sets them to the task of identifying what's wrong with each of the articles. As they group off and get to work, Sheridan circles the room and helps guide them when necessary, but really takes a hands-off approach to the lesson until the end, until she asks them what they think and the class starts discussing it.

"It took me a while to get outside the box," she said, now 11 years into teaching. She used to lecture from a PowerPoint and students would take notes. Now, the formula seems simple:

"When I'm uncomfortable, the kids are excited."

Sheridan is known for her exciting lessons: Like when she dressed up as Benjamin Franklin and transformed her room into the Continental Congress (complete with candles on desks instead of fluorescent lights). Or when she brought in Mary Beth Tinker, of the free speech case *Tinker v. Des Moines*, to talk to her students. Or when she transformed her room again for "speed electing" which, yes, is just like speed dating except with anonymous politicians whose qualifications you're looking over.

This creative approach is what makes her The News-Journal's Amazing Teacher for the month of October.

"She breathes government, if you will, and she marries her passion for educating children," said Heritage Middle Principal Nicholas Fidance. "We got a rock star of a teacher."

Sheridan knew from a young age that she wanted to teach, but didn't realize she wanted to focus in on middle school and on civics until she was in college. She came across a study that said Americans knew more about the Simpson's TV show than about the Constitution, and from there she was committed to changing that.

"Kids come back to tell me that they voted, and I feel like I impacted them in some way," she said.

Civics has always been a heavy lift for 12-year-olds. The idea of good citizenship is something they won't truly be confronted with until they're 18 and have some of those responsibilities like voting and serving on a jury. They're also at a higher level than they're usually faced with — the state assessment for civics asks them to do much more than recall facts. That's why Sheridan's approach that requires students to get in-

involved and make connections and draw their own conclusions is so important.

"This is all foreign to them," explained Danell Tills, a social studies resource teacher with the Volusia County School District. "Teachers used to be a 'sage on a stage' ... now we want them to be a facilitator of learning."

And Sheridan still loves it. She has a PhD now in social sciences education with a focus in civics — but after taking a couple of years off to finish that, she came back to the classroom. It's where she feels she's making the biggest difference.

"There have only been a couple of days that I've woken up and not wanted to go to school," she said, in all her time teaching. "And it's because I got the flu!"