



This year's Robert Ax middle school recipient has demonstrated a passion for and commitment to rigorous teaching and has won the admiration and affection of her many students – and parents – over the years. She teaches her students how to learn through acute perception and hard work. Her goal is to get them to work and think independently – to guide their own learning and unlock their own potential. ...And when kids are properly challenged, they rise to the occasion every time.

Her dedication to her craft has inspired teachers across the country and around the globe to emulate her methods. You might even call her classroom a teaching laboratory, because it has served as a clinical proving ground where educational theories are put to the test. Her classroom is also a safe, respectful, creative, and socially relevant space for her pupils.

But how did our award winner's story begin?

- Born in the "Garden City" of India... Bangalore, our recipient's early life there was filled with colorful [BOO-Gan-Vilia], pomegranate trees, monkeys, and her grandfather's Great Danes.
- Her family later moved to Bombay, where she attended Walsingham House School in the former palace of the Maharajah of Kutch [rhymes with "Butch"].
- When she was 15, her family immigrated to the US, settling in upstate Albany, New York, where she attended and graduated from Shen High School, part of the Shenen-dehowa Central School District in Clifton Park.

She attended Fairfield University in Connecticut, where she majored in English and History. Upon graduating, she worked for several years as an assistant editor at Macmillan in the publishing industry in New York City.

She married shortly thereafter, and, with the arrival of her first child, left publishing for the more challenging job of motherhood, ultimately raising three children. She lived with her young family in Washington, D.C., for several years before relocating to Glen Rock in 1996.

Helping out in her children's classrooms was an opportunity to observe and appreciate some excellent educators – Marsha Kaiser, Marianne Marino, Pat Eckert, and Diane Schlegal, for example. Several encouraged her to try teaching.



She began at West Side Presbyterian Nursery School in Ridgewood. When her third child reached elementary school, she then pursued and obtained her teaching certificate from Ramapo College. Her first teaching job was second grade at Coleman School. The next year, she moved to teach sixth grade Block at Glen Rock Middle School and has been here ever since.

Teaching Block was her greatest joy. It enabled her to create a cross-disciplinary experience, interweaving Writing, English, and Social Studies. Her work ethic **took her far beyond** the dismissal bell... grading papers, creating lessons, and further educating herself in teaching methods. Her relationships with students **extend far beyond** the 6th grade school year. Usually around the holidays, alumni from the upper grades, college **and beyond** stop by to visit her. She has been asked to write college recommendation letters – on quite a few occasions, I'd imagine.

But the story doesn't end there. As I just mentioned, it's that work ethic, *this time taking her far beyond* her brick and mortar classroom. She took to the Internet, mastered cloud-based utilities for the classroom, Social Media *and* the blogosphere, and connected with a worldwide community of educators. She has attended the periodic Saturday workshops at Columbia Teacher's College, Heinemann Publishing's Professional Workshop in Boothbay, Maine, and has presented at NCTE (the National Council of Teachers of English).

She and her class have been featured in books by Heinemann's Vicki Vinton and Kylene Beers. In October 2015, she was invited to be one of the opening speakers at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's 1st US Education Learning Forum, sharing the dais with Bill and Melinda Gates, and the late Gwen Ifill of *PBS Newshour*, among others. "Teacher voices need to be heard," she said at the forum. "Teachers should be encouraged to speak out and ask for the tools, feedback and development opportunities we need for our students to succeed."

This year not only marks her receiving this award, it also marks her retirement. She'll be on her farm in upstate New York, with plans to write.

So instead of shepherding students, she'll be shepherding...

Well, you can probably figure it out!

It is indeed my honor to present the Middle's School's 2017-18 Robert Ax Award recipient, Mrs. TARA SMITH.