Resource Teacher Spotlight: Valentina Reiling

Currently in her first year as a learning resource teacher for 3-4-5, Valentina Reiling is in her 13th year as a teacher at Stanley. She came right out of Colorado College in 2003, into the Stanley Intern program with mentor teacher Jon Gottesfeld, and onto become a co-teacher with Jon and later a lead teacher when he took his sabbatical. Valentina teaches mainly math now in the classroom, and is the lunch monitor Mondays through Wednesdays where she mediates conflicts among kids, getting them through the lunch line and off to the playground gracefully.

Students know Valentina is just plain good at teaching. “She makes it so it’s individualized for every kid,” described one student when asked, What’s it like working with Valentina? “She knows when I have a question even if I don’t know how to ask it – no matter what type of day I’m having. She knows how to keep the mood happy and not crazy. She knows how to keep you interested if you’re having a bored kind of day. Yesterday I realized I have math with Valentina four times a week – and thought all along it was only three days – that shows what kind of teacher Valentina is right there!”

Valentina excels at getting to know each student as a person and treating them as equals – embracing each individual. Another student offered that Valentina is strict and a little goofy, “She’s not always serious,” he said, then treated this interviewer to one version of the Valentina fractions and multiples dance – it’s memorable. Ask your student...

Valentina has made an empathetic move from lead teacher to learning resource. “The thing about being a lead teacher is that you are on all day – from the first child in the door, to the last one at day’s end. As a learning resource teacher, you don’t have that pressure. I still love being connected with kids, but I have more energy and flexibility to give. I know what it means to be a lead classroom, and my perspective now – knowing all that a lead teacher does – is that I need to give whatever I can, and do as much as I can for those lead teachers to take something off their plates.”

Valentina is most proud of allowing students to feel known and cared for, to feel that their voice matters, to experience the pride of working hard to accomplish and of being part of something bigger than them. But her pride and joy is two-year-old daughter Vivian, she has with husband Kip.

Vivian is a central focus in Valentina’s life right now, and she’s in a very active imagination phase. “She is very imaginative and very verbal,” says Valentina, “so we do a lot of tea parties and make-believe play. Lots of cooking and tasting and acting out her books.” Her students – a few of which came to talk to me about the merits of Valentina as a teacher – any kind of teacher – tell us that interactive side is very big with Valentina.

What has teaching at Stanley taught Valentina about parenting? “Everything really,” says Valentina. “I think Carolyn’s vision is so child-centered, and so important. With children, and students, you can’t rigidly hold to an agenda. Stanley, and parenting I’m learning, is about being present in that moment with that child. At Stanley, I learned the importance of language. I spend a lot of time thinking about just right language to get a lesson across – what language can help Vivian access a lesson? What tone of voice, word choice, how you phrase something...
“Carolyn’s whole constructive philosophy, reminds me to let Vivian guide her in her process, follow what’s she’s found on her own,” says Valentina. “Take a step back and let her lead. There’s so much about being a Stanley teacher that’s not about teaching, but about being present with the student at that moment.”

And this leads Valentina to another aspect of Stanley that’s guiding her role as a parent, as a Learning Resource Teacher... “There are so many ways to be smart. New parents are taught to look for every milestone, and want to start picking apart each step of the way: ‘Why isn’t my child crawling first? Why isn’t she doing puzzles yet?...’ I’ve learned from teaching at Stanley, that my role is to help kids know themselves first, their challenges and their strengths.”

There’s also the risk-taking piece, adds Valentina. “It’s so easy as a parent to want to protect our kids, but it’s important to let them take risks and learn – and most of all, to learn to be part of a community and to give back. Stanley’s social-emotional piece is central. In fact, Carolyn’s philosophy is every ounce of who I am as a teacher and a parent. Her vision was so child centered, there’s nothing I can’t take with me as a parent. It truly is about knowing and embracing the whole child.”

"Who you are when no one is around, that’s character," Valentina quotes a visiting author to Stanley from many years ago. “That quote stuck with me. I typed it up and posted it in our classroom as a subtle reminder every day that integrity is created each day in the smallest of actions.”