Learning Resource Spotlight: Aya Schickel

Aya Schickel, beloved Spanish instructor in our K-5 classrooms, joined Stanley in the 2007-2008 school year. Students know Aya as a warm, enthusiastic and fun-loving teacher who loves to weave a good story en español, of course. Minding so many grade levels means Aya works with about 300 students each week! She is passionate about creating a foundation of second-language acquisition for Stanley students, primarily using a methodology called TPRS (Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling).

The program was created in 1990 and has developed more and more fully since, explains Aya. It involves telling and asking about a story while incorporating a series of questions that allows the students to hear many repetitions of a word or phrase while maintaining interest. Similar to acquiring a first language, TPRS does not expect output (speaking and writing) in the new language until there has been plenty of input (listening and reading). “With this questioning process,” says Aya, “I am able to differentiate for the varying abilities in my classes. By 5th grade, and sometimes earlier, students are ready to answer my questions using complete sentences. Throughout the stories, particularly in K-1-2, the students have a great time as they are able to act out the characters.”

Besides storytelling, kids spend time with Aya singing songs, performing call-and-response chants and playing games like the Map Game, the Numbers Game, Jeopardy and Spanish baseball (¿Juegas al béisbol?). The beginning of each of Aya’s 3-4-5 classes is led by three students: One leads the Hello Song, one is responsible for completing the date on the board and a third leads the class in calendar activities that include chanting the days of the week, the months of the year – with numbers 1-31 – discussing the day’s weather and various other useful activities. One of Aya’s special events comes at the end of each year, when students in 3-4-5 Spanish read a short novel written for beginning Spanish students. “Throughout the year leading up to the novel, I tailor our vocabulary to match the language in the novel as much as possible,” says Aya. “It is truly awesome to hear a class of students, reading and translating these short novels.”

While the stories Aya and her students tell in 3-4-5 dovetail with the TTWE curriculum (Time Travel and World Exploration), in K-1-2 classes, the stories are often about making friends, losing teeth, having pets and other topics pertinent to the life of a five- to eight-year-old child. “In our annual Potato Head family story,” says Aya, “the family often travels either in Colorado, the U.S. or around the world, primarily to Spanish speaking countries. Throughout the year, I infuse as much culture into our stories as possible. For example, when the students are studying Ancient Civilizations, we tell a story about King Montezuma of the Aztecs.”

With so many kids, Aya’s smart approach has been to model the language, encourage experimentation and participation, and develop a collaborative curriculum. Says Aya, “My kindergarteners and 3rd graders see each day what my expectations for the 2nd and 5th graders are. The students understand I will have the same expectations for them when they reach the top grade in their classes.” As for inspiring a love of the language, Aya takes pride in knowing her students generally continue learning the Spanish language at Stanley, and many enter high school in Spanish levels three or four.

One of her favorite annual experiences at Stanley resides decidedly in English-language pursuits – or some derivation thereof. For the past several years, Aya’s been a key part of the 5th-grade musical team. “I am currently in charge of costumes, sets and props for our upcoming show Shrek, The Musical,” says Aya. “I LOVE being a part of this creative process; this always one of the highlights of my year.”

The musical represents one of the most treasured hallmarks of Stanley from Aya’s perspective: Community. “Being both a Stanley faculty member and parent for the last 11 years has allowed me to enjoy so much of what Stanley has to offer,” says Aya. “It is great to be a part of a community of people who share my passion for progressive education for children.”

Several years before having children or joining Stanley, Aya taught in public schools in California and Colorado for 10 years. When their oldest child entered kindergarten at Stanley, and Aya and her husband became a part of the Stanley
parent community, Aya knew she wanted to be involved here on a deeper level.

With roots in Denver established during the past 20 years, Aya’s family has grown to include three Stanley-educated daughters: Ruby, now 16, Scarlett, 12, and Lila, 12. In her spare time, Aya loves to garden, travel, read, bike, cook and spend time with family and friends. She’s been in a book club, adds Aya, “with a group of sensational women” for the last ten years. And most recently, she joined the Voices Rock! choir directed by former Stanley music teacher Jill Teas. “Singing in groups,” says Aya, “feeds my soul.”

One of her favorite quotes, from early childhood education professor Cathy Nutbrown, reflects the brightness of joyful expectation so apparent in Aya’s approach to guiding children: “Pausing to listen to an airplane in the sky, stooping to watch a ladybug on a plant, sitting on a rock to watch the waves crash over the quayside – children have their own agendas and timescales. As they find out more about their world and their place in it; they work hard not to let adults hurry them. We need to hear their voices.”

“After 19 years of teaching ages varying from kindergarten to 8th grade,” adds Aya, “in subjects varying from Language Arts, Social Studies, Visual Arts to Algebra and Spanish, I feel so fortunate to teach Spanish here at Stanley each day. Spending my days with children brings me great joy.”