

Building Relationships With Students, Brick by Brick

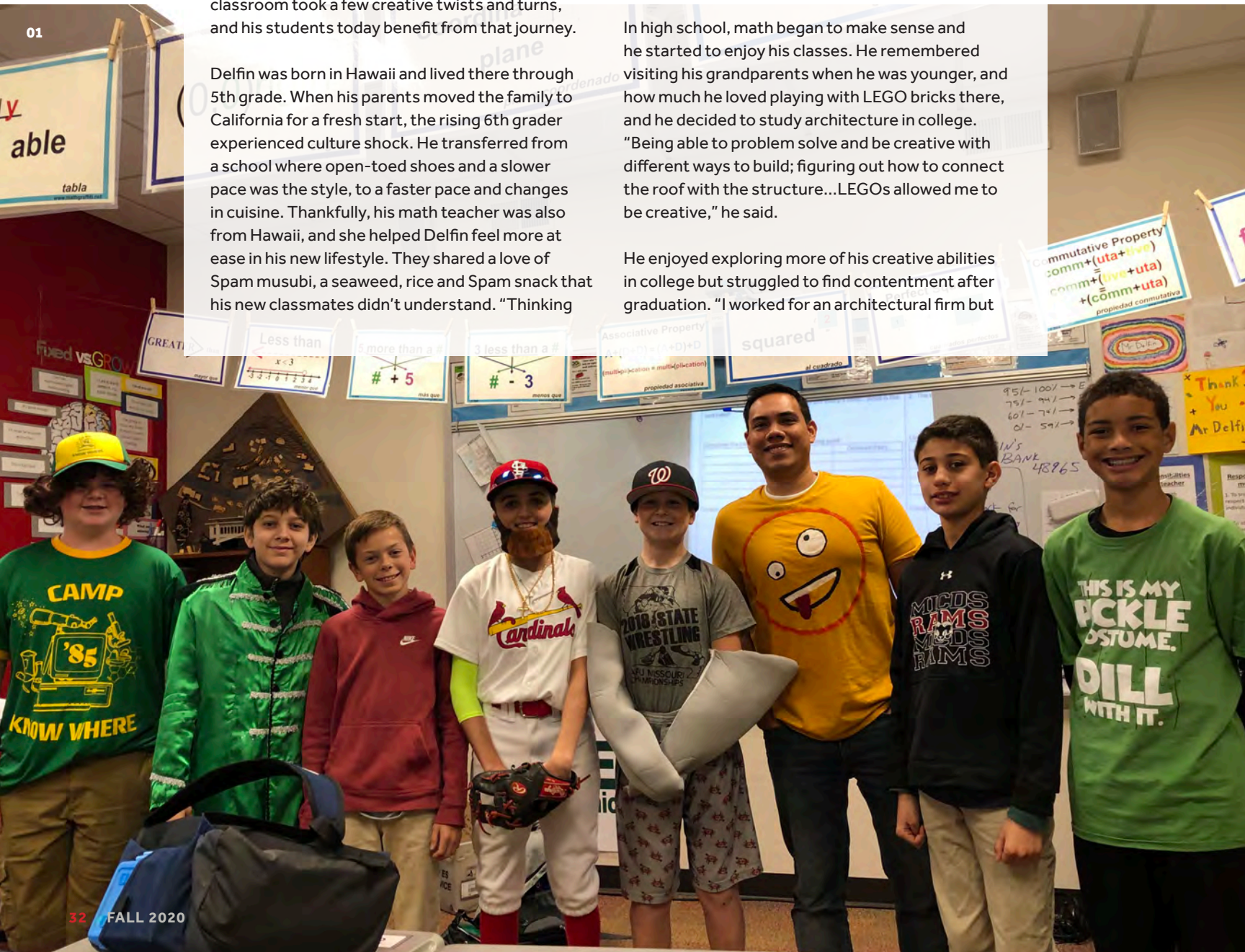
"If you'd have told my 13-year-old self I was going to be a math teacher I would have been really confused. I did not have a good relationship with math," said **Middle School Math Teacher Dustin Delfin**. His path to the classroom took a few creative twists and turns, and his students today benefit from that journey.

Delfin was born in Hawaii and lived there through 5th grade. When his parents moved the family to California for a fresh start, the rising 6th grader experienced culture shock. He transferred from a school where open-toed shoes and a slower pace was the style, to a faster pace and changes in cuisine. Thankfully, his math teacher was also from Hawaii, and she helped Delfin feel more at ease in his new lifestyle. They shared a love of Spam musubi, a seaweed, rice and Spam snack that his new classmates didn't understand. "Thinking

back, the different lifestyles going from Hawaii to California could have been hard to adjust if I didn't have that teacher to provide comfort. No one else wanted to try Spam musubi, but my teacher loved it," he recalled.

In high school, math began to make sense and he started to enjoy his classes. He remembered visiting his grandparents when he was younger, and how much he loved playing with LEGO bricks there, and he decided to study architecture in college. "Being able to problem solve and be creative with different ways to build; figuring out how to connect the roof with the structure...LEGOs allowed me to be creative," he said.

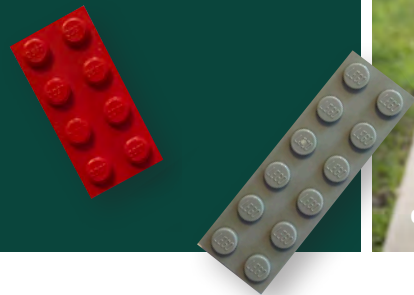
He enjoyed exploring more of his creative abilities in college but struggled to find contentment after graduation. "I worked for an architectural firm but



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DUSTIN DELFIN



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didn’t experience much creative growth, not as much fulfillment as I thought it would have for me.” Then one day his boss, an adjunct professor at a community college, asked for a favor that would change the trajectory of Delfin’s life. She needed a substitute teacher for her architecture class. Despite his misgivings, Delfin agreed. “That’s the moment when I fell in love with teaching. I could bridge teaching and architecture and then math and architecture and realized I could be really creative in the classroom.”

His students today are the beneficiaries of that creativity. Delfin has turned middle school math on its head, from his flipped-classroom approach to his fun projects that encourage students to learn math without even realizing it.

In Delfin’s flipped classroom, students learn new mathematical concepts from their teacher... at home. Their evening homework consists of watching videos and demonstrations Delfin creates himself. Students then return to the classroom each day with their questions and ideas. Students and teacher work through math problems together, and Delfin is right there to stop an incorrect method in its tracks. “I don’t want to just teach students the steps of memorizing. I want them to *understand*. It’s a different way of looking at math problems: not just memorizing but understanding, and providing more support at home.” He admits that sometimes parents are skeptical at first, but they soon realize that the process is much less stressful. They can also watch the videos with their children and learn (or

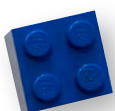
re-learn!) themselves, enabling them to help if needed. “When I was a kid I would take notes in class and listen, and it would kind of make sense. But when I’d go home and open my notebook, none of the notes made sense,” said Delfin. He remembers struggling to complete homework without really understanding the concept. In his flipped classroom, students can watch the videos over and over if needed, and their teacher is there to help them with “homework” in the classroom.

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01. Delfin poses with his advisory in their Halloween costumes.
02. Delfin brings a fresh approach to teaching math.
03. Fun projects help Delfin’s students understand mathematical concepts rather than rote memorization.



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The timeline of understanding goes well beyond each individual lesson. Delfin’s students routinely take spiral assessments that help them flex their math muscles on concepts learned before. By the end of the term, they’ve been fully engaged with each lesson every week. Previously taught math skills stay sharp and in the foreground, building a firm foundation that will last a lifetime.

He dove into these concepts when he began teaching in California and brought them to MICDS when he and his wife, Trisha, moved their family to St. Louis. They now have three children, Tommy (5), Elliot (3), and newborn Jacob. The LEGO bricks were set aside with little ones in the house, but Delfin has a dream to turn the basement of his home into a LEGO play zone with a city that keeps expanding. When the pandemic forced everyone to stay home, Delfin took out his bricks and introduced his oldest sons. Tommy and Elliot are now following in their dad’s footsteps and exploring through free play. “You can see the gears moving as they’re exploring the sets, and that’s when the learning is happening.” Tommy helped his dad create a LEGO Danforth Hall this spring.



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Delfin brings that sense of fun and his creativity to the classroom each year. One of his more popular projects involves students collaborating to create a product and start a business. Teams are given a budget and deadlines, and they get to work developing production, marketing, and sales plans. They hit up their peers and all the 6th grade teachers to buy their products, tracking data online. At the end of the “sales season,” students report their earnings and then make plans on how to invest their profit. They can give donations to nonprofits, purchase homes and cars, or take a vacation. And through it all, they’re using math. “Every year I add something different, and at the end of the year, I reflect on what worked and see how I can make it better.”

His favorite part of teaching is learning from his students. “I’m not the most athletic person, but my students may teach me how to throw a football, or the rules of a sports game, or different ways to solve a math problem that I wouldn’t come across. I have the privilege to teach students from different backgrounds, and I gain a wealth of knowledge from learning from these students,” he said. “Our roles are interchangeable. They become the teacher; I become the student. This helps me build relationships, like how my 6th grade teacher did that for me.”

- 01. Delfin and his sons enjoy LEGO architecture.
- 02. The Delfin Family: Dustin, Trisha, Jacob, Tommy, and Elliot.
- 03. Danforth Hall, home of the MICDS Middle School, recreated in LEGO.



“He made math fun by letting us create businesses. While creating businesses he taught us math, teamwork, and responsibility. In advisory, he taught us leadership and tried to keep us motivated all the time.”

YUSUF ZAYED '26



“I think Mr. Delfin did great as math teacher and advisor,” said **Yusuf Zayed '26**. “He made math fun by letting us create businesses. While creating businesses he taught us math, teamwork, and responsibility. In advisory, he taught us leadership and tried to keep us motivated all the time. He would always check on us, if we are doing well in school and out of school. He also cared about our relationship with friends. Whenever we had a problem in school he would lend us a hand. I am very happy that I got Mr. Delfin as an advisor in 6th grade.”

Gabriel Weaver '26 said, “Mr. Delfin was an awesome advisor/math teacher. He took stuff seriously but also had fun at the same time! The assignments and projects were fun and straight forward.”

It sounds like Delfin has become much like his favorite teacher from his own 6th grade year. “I felt safe in her classroom; I felt I was able to take risks. She cared about her students, and later I recognized how important that connection was,” he said. His own students enjoy that kind of connection today.



04. Doing homework in class eliminates frustration for many of Delfin’s students.

05. Project-based learning inspires creativity and a deeper understanding of math.



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