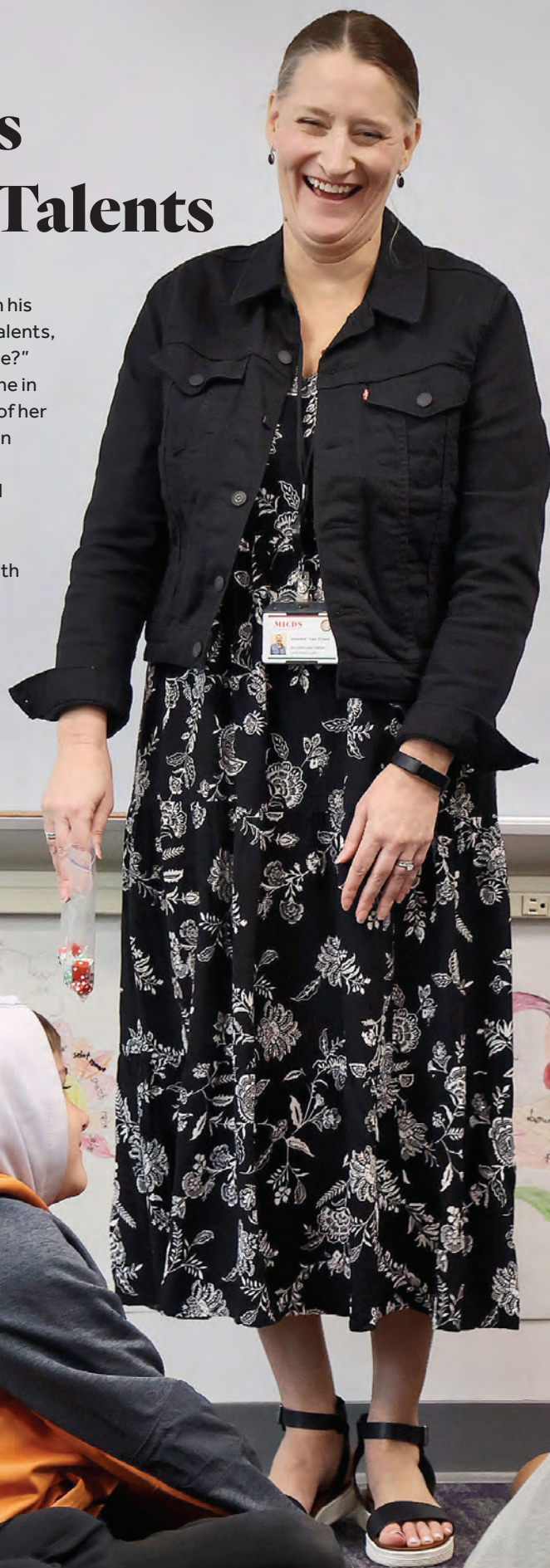


Jen Van Dyken's Not So Hidden Talents

Benjamin Franklin published many wise aphorisms in his *Poor Richard's Almanack*, including "Hide not your talents, for use they were made. What's a sundial in the shade?"

Fourth-grade Teacher Jen Van Dyken's talents shine in her classroom, to the great fortune—and delight—of her students. It's also an apt description since Van Dyken loves Franklin, and spreads her enthusiasm to her students through her Ben Franklin socks, shirts, and of course, books.

History is not her only passion, though. This polymath enjoys sharing her love of reading, her excitement over writing, and her dogged determination that everyone can not only handle but enjoy learning math; it just takes the kind of slow, deep thinking that she studied for her master's program.



A natural-born teacher, Van Dyken fought this path initially. "My whole family is teachers," she said. "My mom, all my aunts, my in-laws...everyone." She studied English, Spanish, and international affairs in college, planning for a life of reading and editing and quieting the side of her that has always loved children. She started babysitting "as soon as people would let me take care of their kids," and was a nanny through college. After earning her bachelor's, she lived in Ecuador and taught English through World Teach. It was her first formal teaching experience, and still, she rejected education as a long-term career. After returning home to the United States, she joined a company that makes educational supplies. It was a valuable learning experience. "I hated being in a cubicle," she said. "Corporate America and working my way up is not for me." She began substitute teaching during the day, earning her credentials at night. She finally admitted what her heart had known all along: she was born to teach.

Van Dyken has now taught at a variety of levels in her 21 years of education, and in two languages. Her first role was teaching kindergarten in Spanish. Since then, she's delved into first and fifth grades before settling into fourth grade at MICDS four years ago. Originally from California, she and her husband, Steve, followed a wonderful opportunity for him at Washington University, where he now runs an immunology research laboratory. She had never been to Missouri, much less St. Louis, but she leaped with both feet and she loves it. They bought a house that needed some attention, sight unseen by her, in an area they wanted, helped by a realtor who is also an MICDS grandparent. "It was a big lifestyle change," she admits, "but we were able to buy a house here versus renting in San Francisco, and we have a more low-key, family-friendly place

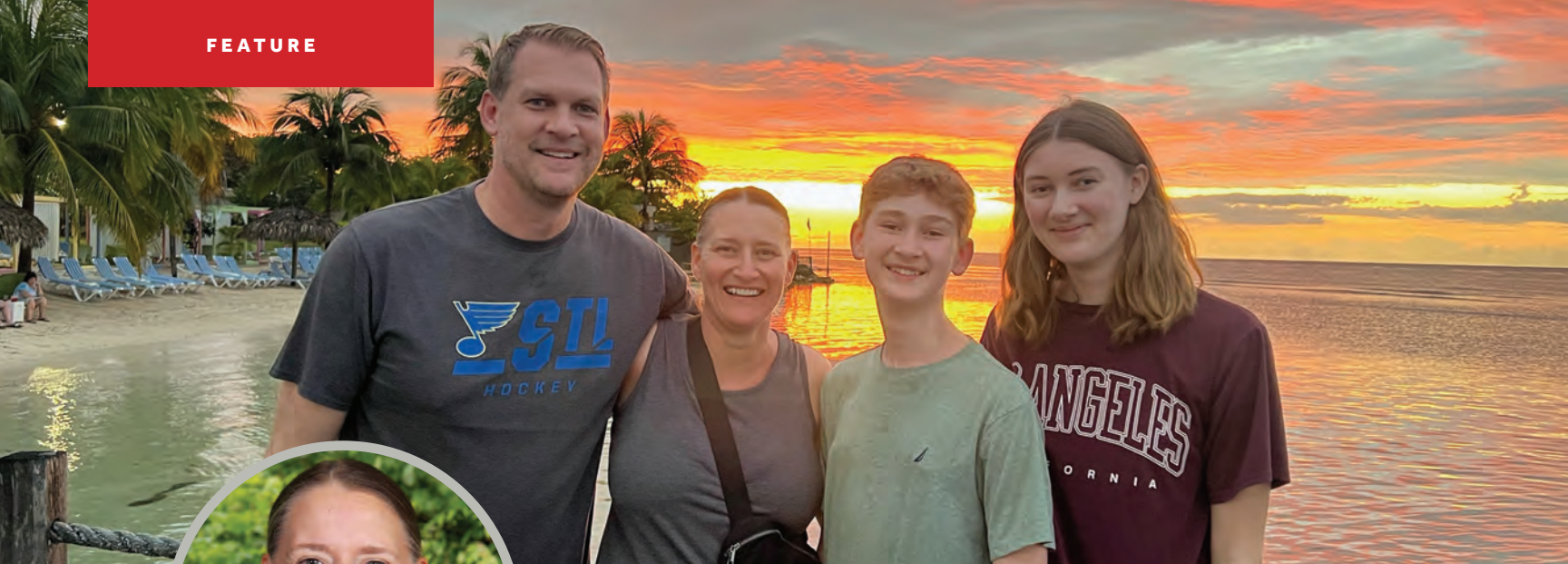


to raise our kids." They've spent the last five years fixing up their home and enjoying all the amenities their new home has to offer. "We have done all the St. Louis stuff, and everything is free here: the Zoo, the Science Center." They've hit Grant's Farm and her daughter, as part of a chorus for school, has sung at a Cardinals game. Van Dyken had decided to take a break from teaching when they moved, but soon found she missed leading a classroom. Volunteering at her children's school just wasn't enough.

She has worked hard to create a vibrant space where students can thrive in fourth grade. "I always loved school. I'm a rule follower and a really good student. When I was in high school, I always loved reading, writing, and English," she said. "I had an AP English teacher

>> continued on page 26





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FOURTH-GRADE TEACHER JEN VAN DYKEN

>> continued from page 25

and got a B+ on something and I was devastated. She told me, ‘If you want an A, you have to earn it,’ and it was life-changing.” Van Dyken realized that things were going to get harder and required effort. It was a healthy push that she aspires to pass along to her students today. Teaching has also given her a love of new subjects. “I love U.S. history, but I didn’t fall in love with it until I started teaching it.” She appreciates that U.S. history at MICDS starts in fourth grade, not fifth, and was one of the reasons she was excited to join the Lower School teaching team.

Now, she’s thrilled to share her passion for the colonies, and Ben Franklin of course, with her students. “He was a lifelong learner,” she said. “Open to changing his mind, learning from his mistakes, and the only Founding Father to be involved in every aspect.” She focuses time on Franklin each year and jokes that a former student had told her when she was pregnant with her son that she should name him after Franklin. Benjamin Van Dyken, now 12, was born shortly after, joining Annika, now 15.

The Van Dyken family loves musical theater and making music. Jen sings, Steve plays classical piano, Annika sings, and Benjamin plays the viola. Their leopard gecko, Leo, hasn’t found his musical talent yet. “There’s always music going in our house,” she said, “and we blast music in the car and sing along.” Like most transplants in St. Louis, she likes toasted ravioli and gooey butter cake but takes a pass at Imo’s pizza. They like to travel and explore new places; Van Dyken has also lived in Costa Rica, spent a semester in London with the Florida State theater department when she was an undergrad, and has gone SCUBA diving and snorkeling in Mexico and the Caribbean, each experience opening windows into different communities and cultures. At home, they enjoy visiting The Fox for musical theater and attending Annika and Ben’s shows and performances. The family is always on the go.

Van Dyken's classroom is full of this sort of energy. She created Classroom City, in which every student citizen has a job. "We have a mayor, city council, and other more traditional jobs like snack person, library crew, office assistant, and tech crew," she explained. "We have a currency—scholar dollars—so students can learn about profit and loss and taxes through our own little classroom economy." Students earn scholar dollars for doing their jobs and answering tricky questions. "As much as I hope they're intrinsically motivated, it helps with nine- and 10-year-olds to have some rewards." The class banker keeps track of money, while the student store manager keeps track of a shop that offers small items such as stickers, 3D animal erasers, and gel pens. The entire class enjoyed auctions for which students brought items from home. "You cannot predict what's going to go or for how much," Van Dyken laughed. The system creates routine and predictable procedures, which helps her class run itself while keeping students engaged.

While she loves teaching history, writing, and math, the "read-aloud" is her favorite part of the school day. She keeps up on new middle-grade fiction, mixing in new releases with old favorites that snag students' attention and holds their interest. Her students love this time, learning to engage with literature on a purely pleasurable level while connecting with characters and each other. "It's ok to have emotions when reading books," as Van Dyken models when tearing up during an emotional scene or giggling with the class over a funny passage. She follows middle-grade literature trends on social media through Twitter and BookTok and participates in the Global Read Aloud that uses one book each year to connect students from around the world. "You can Zoom with other classes and try to guess their location, send and receive postcards from other states and countries; kids are blogging to each other and they're all connecting over the same book," she said.

Her love of reading extends beyond her classroom; she's constantly recommending books to her colleagues and often to **Lower School Librarian Thomas Buffington**, who is carefully curating a collection of newer books to supplement old favorites. Her students enjoy small group book clubs in class, tackling a new book every three weeks. Van Dyken will choose a theme or category, so all the book clubs are reading the same topic, such as the Revolutionary War, or genres such as realistic fiction or fantasy. "They meet with their book club on Fridays and the kids love it," she said. "The groups get them reading things they may not have chosen on their own."

Van Dyken says it's important to be careful about recommending appropriate books based on age, but it's also important to know your children. "Sometimes you need life experience," she said, "but bans worry me because we learn so much as humans through books and stories. I started making a real effort many years ago to read things that are not my story. We talk about books as being mirrors and windows; kids want to see themselves in stories but you also want windows into experiences that are not your own."



She's adept at introducing new experiences into her classroom environment, too. "My goal this year was to develop a 'Thinking Classroom,' so I implemented a Monday Math Challenge and a Friday STEM challenge," she said. Her students worked together in small groups to complete difficult challenges or solve problems, including cup stacking with rubber bands; building a slow marble track; and creating structures with spaghetti, marshmallows, index cards, toothpicks, and Dots candy. She infuses her lessons with humor, leveraging her self-described "big personality" to incorporate songs and jokes into learning. Her students love it, and feed off her enthusiasm for school spirit (she never misses an opportunity to dress up) and learning.

All of that fun is woven into a classroom that ensures every student learns every lesson, and every problem is solved by the end of the unit. Students receive clear instructions and expectations, and know that Van Dyken will follow every missed answer with the work necessary to reach the right conclusion. "The kids figure that out really early on, that everything is checked and mistakes will need to be corrected," she said, "and you see them start slowing down, checking their own work, and asking for help when they don't understand." Individualized instruction supports a whole-class goal of moving forward together, and together, they create a culture of learning by doing the work.

By the end of the year, Van Dyken's students are prepared for the next leg of their educational journey (the Middle School), armed with enthusiasm, perseverance, and a healthy appreciation for new experiences. Benjamin Franklin said, "The doors of wisdom are never shut," and neither is Jen Van Dyken's classroom.