

Minnesota Teacher of the Year Derek Olson '88 creates a classroom environment that is alive with possibilities for his students.

Mr. O's World

By J. Trout Lowen

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TOM ROSTER AND ANDREW WALLMEYER

At the beginning of each school year, Derek Olson engages in a little show-and-tell to help his students understand what the coming year will be like. He unrolls a yellow road down the middle of the classroom. It leads to the “mountain of junior high.” Olson explains the rules of the road and then tells his sixth-graders that his goal is to get them safely to their destination. But, as he demonstrates using a radio-controlled truck, there is more than one way to get there. First he drives the truck straight down the road to the mountain. The second time he ventures off road.

“I drive like crazy around the room and bang into things,” Olson says. “It still gets to the mountain at the end of the road, but it’s more adventurous and exciting and that’s the kind of year I hope we can have.”

“My greatest achievement as an educator will simply be to make a positive impact in the life of a child. To watch them grow, to watch them learn to love to learn, and hopefully to leave my room ready for whatever the world brings them.”

Standing in Olson’s classroom at Afton-Lakeland Elementary near Stillwater, Minnesota, at the end of May, it is clear the class has been “off road” a lot. Nearly every surface of the room is buried beneath photos, posters, and projects, including desktop robots, a papier-mâché Egyptian sphinx head, and a nearly life-sized sarcophagus, all created by his science and social studies students.

The students sit clustered around tables in groups of five and six. Instead of conventional chairs, they perch, bounce, bob, and wiggle around on big blue rubber balls. From the front of the room the effect is a little like watching atoms pulse with energy. Not surprisingly, “Mr. O,” a nineteen-year veteran sixth-grade teacher, seems immune to the distractions.

This past year held more distractions than most. In July 2008 Olson was named Minnesota Teacher of the Year, and in January 2009 he began a one-year term representing Minnesota as Teacher of the Year at the federal level.

(The two awards have different, overlapping terms.) The prestigious title comes with a flurry of press appearances, speeches, and educational opportunities at places like Harvard. There are trips, too, to Space Camp in Huntsville, Alabama, and to Washington, D.C. for a Rose Garden ceremony with President Barack Obama and the other forty-nine state award recipients. He has also had opportunities to sit down with leaders in education and elected officials to discuss the impact of education policy in the classroom.

“It’s been a crazy year,” says Olson. “It’s been a wonderful year, with many amazing experiences, personal and professional growth, and opportunities to be an advocate for education and most importantly, for kids.”

Olson has worked hard to include his students in those

opportunities as often as possible, blogging daily during his trip to Washington, D.C., and allowing them to listen in — on speaker phone — during some media interviews and critique his performance afterward. While some teachers might balk at such disruptions to the regular curriculum, Olson welcomes them as another opportunity to bring the world to his students, a philosophy that’s central to how he teaches.

“We basically have two classrooms,” he explains. “We have the world and we have what’s inside these windows. We try to spend as much time out in the world as we possibly can. Because why would you stay within these four walls if you don’t have to?”

Mr. O’s world includes a mock archeology dig he creates each fall by burying “artifacts” out on the playground. The students excavate them and try to identify what cultures they came from and what they might have been used for. Some of the artifacts are things Olson collected during his Term in Asia semester at St. Olaf.

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While studying the Middle Ages, Olson's students hosted a festival for students, teachers, and parents, making costumes and acting out roles as serfs, merchants, and feudal lords. As part of a science unit, they worked in groups to design and build computer-guided robots capable of traveling and shooting a ping-pong ball through a hoop.

"For me, a good teacher isn't only one who has high test scores every year," he says. "A good teacher is one who brings [his or her] students through a tremendous amount of growth."

A Life-Changing Experience

Olson credits his St. Olaf professors and study-abroad experience for igniting his curiosity about the world as well as his passion for teaching. Neither was exactly on his radar in his first years at St. Olaf, where he majored in economics. "My 'sort of' life goal was to get a job and make a lot of money," he says. "Fortunately, I had an opportunity to participate in the Far East program, which changed my life in many ways."

After an Interim of Interdisciplinary French Studies in France, Olson was eager to expand his comfort zone even further and take advantage of a broader international studies program. He spent a semester senior year on Term in Asia, studying in Thailand and traveling with other Oles in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Tibet, and Japan. As part of the program

the students had an opportunity to visit two orphanages. One day in Hong Kong still stands out in Olson's memory. "We spent a day in an orphanage and worked with these kids, many of whom were from Vietnam. And my heart just went out to them in a way I hadn't experienced before," he recalls.

A photo of one of those orphans, a boy named Vincent, still hangs on Olson's wall at home. "It's a reminder: Don't forget why you're doing what you do. Don't stray from the roots of it. This is not just a job, it's your calling," he explains.

Olson considers these experiences as critical not only to his being able to gain a better global perspective but also "my place in it — as a teacher and an ambassador for public education."

Olson strives to positively impact the lives of his own students, much like the professors who shaped his teaching

"I can't imagine having any more fun at work than I do. Sometimes people ask, 'How can you have the patience for twelve-year-olds?' I think the key is that I realize that acting twelve is the job description of a twelve-year-old. It's when adults act twelve that I don't have much patience."



Olson's world includes a mock archeology dig (left) he creates each fall by burying "artifacts" out on the playground. With the title of Minnesota's Teacher of the Year came a number of opportunities for Olson to be an advocate for public education at the state and federal level. Highlights have included a trip to the White House with the other 49 state Teacher's of the Year to attend a Rose Garden ceremony with President Barack Obama, meetings with state senators to discuss education policy and meeting Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty at the state capitol (above) with his wife, Kris Skistad Olson '89, and their children (from left), Anna, Ben, and Kaija.

philosophy and practice, including, he says, economics professor Stephen Soderlind and professors emeritus Vern Faillettaz and Mac Gimse, who with his wife Jackie, led the Term in Asia program.

"The amazing Professor Gimse exemplifies in so many ways what I strive to be as a teacher, especially his belief that the best way to learn about the world is to see it and experience it," says Olson.

The program impacted Olson's life in other ways, too. He and his wife, Kris (Skistad) '89, adopted three children from Korea, daughters Kaija and Anna and son Ben. "When it became clear that adoption was a good choice for our family, it just seemed natural to go to a part of the world where I have experienced so much," Olson says.

Opening a New Door

Being Teacher of the Year isn't all fun and games. The title comes with a lot of added responsibilities, speaking engagements, and travel that have taken time away from his students and his family, who are unfailingly supportive. Olson has handled it all with humor and humility, always careful to credit the contributions of his fellow teachers, school and district staff, and his family.

When he was nominated for the award by colleague Steve Bliven, a math teacher and 2004 finalist for state teacher of the year, Olson was so worried about hogging the spotlight, he admits, that he almost didn't return the form. "I didn't want people to think I was tooting my own horn." A bruising levy campaign in the Stillwater school district changed his mind.

"That was the beginning of the realization that this was an opportunity to have a platform to say we have *great* teachers

in Stillwater, we have *great* teachers in the state of Minnesota, and we shouldn't take it for granted. It is something we should protect and invest in," he says. "Most teachers are not limited by our dreams for our kids, we are limited by the resources to make those dreams happen."

Being Teacher of the Year has also created bonds with the other forty-nine teachers of the year that will last long after the title has passed on. The group is collaborating online in response to a request from U.S. Education Secretary Arnie Duncan to draft position papers on the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind legislation and other education issues.

The issue is more than just not leaving a child behind, Olson notes. It's looking at how to provide each child in America a chance to succeed to the best of his or her ability. "Especially" he says, "in light of the fact that the students in our classroom today are not competing with the kid across the aisle in the classroom or even the child down the hall. They are competing with students in classrooms across the globe for jobs that haven't even been invented yet. If we are going to successfully provide for them, we need to allow children to grow to their maximum ability and focus our resources on that."

Early in his career, Olson felt his role as a professional educator was "to close my door and teach." After nearly twenty years of working with sixth graders, he's come to realize that "we need to step outside of our classrooms as well. And I believe now I have even more of a responsibility to do so."

Wherever this new road takes Olson, you can bet he'll find a way to take his students with him. 🦉

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