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TOP STORY

WKU student uses autism to connect with K-12 students

By AARON MUDD amudd@bgdailynews.com Apr 26, 2019



When Clay Harville coaches students in math at Bristow Elementary School, his first priority is to make them feel seen.

“My goal is to make sure that the students are aware that there’s someone always looking out for them,” said Harville, who has a mild and high-functioning form of autism that gives him a unique way to connect with students.

Harville, a Western Kentucky University senior from Louisville, participates in the university’s Kelly Autism Program, which he credits for helping him succeed in college and prepare for a career in education.

In May, Harville will graduate from WKU with a dual degree in special and elementary education. According to Jonathan Beaty, Harville's adviser through the Kelly Autism Program, Harville will be the first of the program's students to graduate with a special education degree.

For about two years, Beaty has watched Harville's confidence as an educator grow. In their weekly meetings, Harville pitches new ideas for lesson plans and dreams up new strategies to reel students in, Beaty said. He remembers the time Harville taught a history lesson to students about the famous Hatfield-McCoy feud in the 1800s and how Harville dressed up as a character out of the history books.

"He is willing to go outside the box. ... He's just willing to adapt to what the students need," Beaty said.

Growing up attending a school for special-needs students, Harville said he knows those students have big dreams.

"I want to show them that I can help you overcome the obstacles," he said, adding whatever challenges students face shouldn't stop them from going after what they want out of life.

On Friday, Harville finished his last day student teaching at Bristow Elementary, where he tutored second-grade student Gabe Wilson in a math assignment at a small table in the corner of Becky Cassel's classroom.

Although Harville has visited many schools, "This one has such a positive vibe," he said.

"They really care about their students. They care about how they learn," he said.

Bristow Elementary also stands out to Harville as the school that allowed him to teach more whole group lessons than anywhere else.

Cassel said she's seen Harville grow as an educator in her classroom, where she teaches first- and second-grade students.

“I think that he’s grown with flexibility, responsibility and then he also has learned that the little kids are very spontaneous in what they’re going to say. ... I think it’s been a great experience for him,” she said.

Cassel described Harville as particularly skilled in science and classroom experiments.

After graduation and passing his certification test, Harville wants to look for a teaching assistant job in the Louisville area, he said. But wherever he goes, he’ll take the lessons he’s learned at Bristow Elementary with him, he said.

“They’ve taught me ways to interact with students a lot better, different strategies, lessons and making sure students are heavily engaged,” he said. “Because I’m all about student engagement, and I feel like this school has really shown me that.”

– Follow education reporter Aaron Mudd on Twitter @BGDN_edbeat or visit bgdailynews.com.

Aaron Mudd

Education reporter. Covers education and related issues, focusing primarily on the Bowling Green and Warren County public school districts and Western Kentucky University.

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