



OUTSTANDING EDUCATOR

Mary Kate Riley

For Mary Kate Riley, the path to special education started early. At 14, she began volunteering with Toni's Camp in her home state of Georgia, working with individuals with disabilities. The experience sparked something in her, and she knew she would pursue a degree in special education. After attending the University of Mississippi, a summer as a camp counselor at Easter Seals Wisconsin inspired her to make Wisconsin home.

Now in her eighth year of teaching, Mary Kate works at Verona Area High School, primarily with students with intellectual disabilities and more profound needs. She values having the opportunity to work with students throughout all four years of high school, allowing her to get to know them and their families, understand their goals for life after high school, and see their confidence and independence grow.

Creating meaningful, real-world opportunities is at the heart of Mary Kate's work. One of her favorites is Brewrona, the student-led coffee shop she started at the high school. Students sell drinks and snacks to teachers while gaining hands-on experience with grocery shopping, price analysis, money, and social skills. The program has become a favorite among teachers, who are always asking when the next Brewrona sale will be.

Mary Kate is always looking for new opportunities, resources, and programming to help her students grow. She's quick to credit the educators around her, especially her co-teacher, Ashley Ruck. Together, they're the "dynamic duo, Mary Kate and Ashley." Mary Kate says leaning on Ashley and other educators in her building continues to make her a better teacher.

Beyond the classroom, Mary Kate serves as head coach for Adapted Sports soccer and wiffle ball and as the advisor for Verona Buddies. Across all these roles, what motivates her is the same: giving students opportunities they may not otherwise have and helping them become more independent and confident.

For Mary Kate, student success looks different for everyone. For one student, it might be using a communication device to express a need for the first time. For another, it could be getting a first job in the community. There is no single definition of success, and Mary Kate believes each accomplishment deserves to be celebrated.

When Mary Kate learned she had been selected as an Outstanding Educator, the celebration took her completely by surprise. Walking into the atrium to cheering students, music and supportive coworkers left her overwhelmed with gratitude. "To be celebrated like that in that way was crazy, but in the best way. I am truly grateful for this."

Above all, Mary Kate hopes students leave her classroom knowing how much she cares about them and wants them to succeed in their own way. She hopes they leave with more independence, confidence and responsibility, knowing they can accomplish their goals, even if it takes a little longer or looks a little different.