



ST. MARY'S
ACADEMY

FACULTY FRIDAY PROFILE

KELLI CLARK

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New St. Mary's Academy Principal Kelli Clark has always felt a strong calling toward social justice, but integrating that passion with a career in education came later. Ms. Clark worked with chronically homeless adults as well as homeless street kids as an advocate and social worker before shifting her focus to education in the mid-'90s.

"I earned my master's in teaching in 1997 at Lewis & Clark College and had an internship at Mt. Tabor Middle School in the Cedar Lodge Program, which was a school within a school. It was a very student-centered, project-based program. So that was my first real foray into the world of education," Ms. Clark said.

After years of holding various positions in the social work realm, she'd finally found her calling, something that combined her love of working with youth and her passion for social justice.

Ms. Clark's journey first began when her family's travels finally ended, following her father's retirement from the Air Force and their settling down in Puyallup, Wash. She spent time in the fields doing agricultural work such as harvesting flowers and onions, as well as planting cabbage. She graduated from the Washington State University Pullman campus Honors Program with a Bachelor of Arts in Communications, majoring in journalism and minoring in political science. She was the first person in her family to graduate from college.

"I actually kept leaving college for interesting work and travel opportunities. I was with the Catholic Worker Movement for a short time in Washington, D.C., and a variety of other homeless shelters. I worked at a soup kitchen for children under 12, and we served 300 meals a day. It was a huge learning experience," Ms. Clark said.

After graduating with her degree, she left for the East Coast and spent time in Woburn, Mass., as a foster care advocate and case manager for the Woburn Council for Social Concern. In the late '80s, she moved to the Portland area and worked at an independent living program for street kids. She met and married her late husband, a local musician. She then worked a variety of jobs as a trial assistant, baker and retail customer service provider.

Fast-forward a few years, and Ms. Clark accepted her first teaching job at Kraxburger Middle School in Gladstone, teaching seventh-grade humanities. She took the following year off to care for her critically ill husband and grieve his passing. Then, she was hired at Sellwood Middle School teaching sixth-grade block before achieving her administrator certificate at Lewis & Clark. She was then hired by North Clackamas School District as the assistant principal of Rowe Middle School, a large Title I school.

She transitioned to another phase in her career as an adjunct faculty member and program assistant in the Graduate School of Education at Marylhurst University under Dr. Tom Ruhl. They worked together on creating lab school models and seeing the program through its first accreditation.

"During this time, I also met my husband, Steve Kucas (known to family and friends as 'Beep'). His arrival in my life was a delightful and unexpected gift. He is the 'Fish Guy' for the Portland Water Bureau, preserving native fish populations in our watershed. We share many interests, including attending the contemplative mass at St. Ignatius," Ms. Clark said.

Ms. Clark left Marylhurst for an opportunity to lead as Director at Open Meadow Alternative High School, serving disconnected youth. And now she is here at St. Mary's Academy as our new principal.

"St. Mary's Academy is a great combination of the things I am driven by. The work here engages both my strong social justice passion and my spirituality, and it's an amazing reflection of my whole career between service work and education," Ms. Clark said.

With such an extensive background in these areas, we feel like she's a great fit for St. Mary's, as well.

Q&A with Kelli Clark

Q: Why did you choose SMA?

A: I come from a strong social justice background. What drew me was the opportunity to work with young women who will be leaders in the worlds of work and community. It was the chance to model and challenge ideas of ways to be of service in the world.

Q: What are you most excited about experiencing this year?

A: Girl Power! There's such unique energy when girls get together and focus their time and talent on something. It is creative, fun and meaningful. A whole school driven by that energy is exciting. One thing is for sure, SMA is not sitting still!

Q: What is your favorite academic subject?

A: Oh, I was a journalism dork and served as the editor in chief of the newspaper my junior year of high school. We couldn't serve as the newspaper editor twice, so I talked my way into creating a literary journal. I was also the associated student body secretary and a debate team groupie.

Q: What is your favorite hobby/sport?

A: I love to canoe and actually spent part of last weekend out in Ridgefield picking blackberries from the water. I am a hiker and participate in any activity outside, generally the wilder the better. I avidly garden, vegetables, flowers and herbs. I love art, being on my bike and you should know my passion for dogs is probably clinical. I am a cornhole fiend. We love to build connection in our neighborhood and have a library box, as well as show movies on the lawn during summer. A few weeks ago it was "Footloose" and an '80s dance party. Friends and neighbors loved it! Additionally, I love to travel. I've been to Mexico, the Caribbean, Indonesia, India, Europe and Canada. I think I've lived in or traveled to nearly every single state in the U.S.

Q: What volunteer work do you do?

A: I am on the advisory commission for St. Ignatius Parish School in Southeast Portland. I think working across racial and economic divides is the challenge of our times, and creating equal access to education and economic opportunity is absolutely critical to our communities, to our economy and to our citizenry.

Q: What food item best describes you and why?

A: A noodle bowl. It has lots of flavors, lots of textures, good strong basis, but is always a little surprising.

Q: What book changed your life and why?

A: We lived on a military base in Goose Bay, Labrador (Newfoundland). As a kindergartner there, we were still using Dick and Jane books to learn how to read, which at the time I don't think anyone else used. I remember learning to read with a flip-chart, and when I finally made sense of what we were reading, it was like lightning going off in my head. I actually remember that moment when printed words began to make sense. I've been going crazy ever since with my passion for literature. That's what got me started reading - those Dick and Jane books. As a kid, I was a big classics fan: Dickens, Brontes – I loved that stuff. I have been hugely influenced by Dorothy Day, Simone Weil and Thomas Merton.

Q: What inspires you?

A: Kids inspire me. When young people have an idea about where they want to grow, I want to get behind that and provide them support and resources and help them become their best selves.

