



PHOTOS BY JENNY CELANDER

KRISTINE MAYLE

Unwavering focus on kids keeps teacher committed as school closing date nears

By Melani Davis

Kristine Mayle turned down one job offer at the end of last year and another at the beginning of this year. Though she is painfully aware that her position as Special Education teacher at De La Cruz Middle School is coming to an end, she says she still “felt (she) should be here.”

Last year De La Cruz was included in the list of schools scheduled to be closed, consolidated, turned-around or phased-out under the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) Renaissance 2010 plan. According to school principal Katherine Konopasek, Ms. Mayle was instrumental in helping make their case to the Chicago Board of Education to

have the school remain open one more year to see the 8th grade students graduate. Now the closing again draws near, and Ms. Mayle says it can be difficult to keep the students focused and engaged.

“The kids are a little wilder, give a few more ‘so whats’ or ‘whatevers.’ And now they feel justified... ‘Whatever...they’re closing our school!’ That makes it tough,” she says.

Despite the challenging environment, Kristine tries to remain upbeat and she has an easy rapport with the students that seems to work well for her. She moves through the classroom checking homework, cajoling, bantering, joking, doing whatever she needs to do to keep them on task.

“I actually like them,” she laughs. “I didn’t think I would. I thought I wanted to teach little guys, but then I realized, hey, I like these guys. You can

tease them, have fun with them, joke with them and they don’t cry.”

...

Ms. Mayle grew up in Naperville, an affluent suburb of Chicago. “I was the poor kid in the neighborhood raised by a tough New Yorker — my mom. It definitely gave me a different perspective,” she says.

She attended DePaul University in Chicago, earning a bachelor’s degree in English. Though she had considered teaching when she was younger, she says her fear of public speaking kept her from pursuing it as a career.

After she graduated and found herself working first for a temp agency, then in an office position she hated, she decided to rethink teaching after all. At that point Ms. Mayle went back to school and got her masters degree in both education and special education.

“The more I talk to other teachers,” she laughs, “the more I find out how common a fear of public speaking is in this job.”

“I found this job at a job fair,” she recalls. “We were all standing in the hall waiting to be let into the United Center and I heard this guy say, ‘I need a special ed teacher for two miles south of here.’ Everybody just kind of stared at him. I thought, come on, *its a job fair guys!* I had been to another one on Navy Pier the month before and I wasn’t doing that again! I ran up, threw my resume in his face and he said, ‘I think you might be our girl but I’d want to chat with you first.’”

That was three years ago and she has been at De La Cruz ever since. In that time she has gone from being the “newcomer” to an “oldtimer” Kristine explains. With only eighth grade students remaining at the school and a much smaller staff, ironically, Ms. Mayle is the teacher with the most seniority now.

And how does she feel about teaching now, especially in this unstable environment?

“I love teaching,” she says. “This is what it’s all about, getting them to understand things. I like teaching literature, too. They just finished Hamlet and they *loved* it.”

“That kid over there, can’t read at all but he was walking around saying, I just finished Hamlet! He could explain the whole plot to you. That’s nice — one of the special ed kids reading Hamlet. That’s what I like about teaching, proving that these kids can do it. They just need somebody to believe in them.”

It can be trying though, she admits, and it isn’t easy being every place at once as a special ed teacher.

“Doing inclusion, my own classes — two different subjects. More lesson plans, different types of grading, different types of thinking. So, grading all the different classes, and also doing IEPs as well. I’m stretched really thin. Time is the biggest problem — never having enough of it.”

On the up side though, Kristine says she feels prepared to do just about anything now. She’ll be ready to handle whatever her next employer throws at her. And despite the turmoil, she still plans to seek another position with CPS.

“I never even tried to work in the suburbs. I wanted to work where kids needed me. I knew

“That’s what I like about teaching, proving that these kids can do it. They just need somebody to believe in them.”

how spoiled and lucky I was to have the education I did. My mom kept us in Naperville after my parents split up because education was that important to her. And when I got to college, I thought — Wow, everybody didn’t have this?

“So, I will try to stay with CPS as long as I can, but it’s not for them (the administration) — it’s for the kids. They’re just making it tougher and tougher and they are losing good teachers. Teachers will just say, I don’t need to put up with this.”

The frustration she feels has led Kristine to become more involved in the Chicago Teachers Union, where she serves as a delegate because she feels, “this has to stop.”

“This is my first year as a delegate. I think the Union is important because we need to band together to stop this from happening. Schools are closing and decisions are being made by people

who aren’t educators. Why aren’t they asking the people who actually know about education? I would like the Union to work on that. Hopefully, get the case out to the media a little more.”

“I think being a delegate is a huge responsibility that people need to take seriously. I am appalled that people don’t show up to the meetings. Last month there were only 197 people there. Schools are being closed and delegates can’t even come to the meeting? It makes me so mad. We couldn’t have even done anything if we wanted to. We didn’t have a quorum. It’s frustrating.”

She says she feels CPS should stop moving forward with Ren 2010 “until there is actual evidence to prove that it’s really helping somebody. Because if you look at the numbers, it’s not. I talked to some people from Holmes Elementary School yesterday. Their scores are higher than the turn-around school down the street. So why are they getting shut down? They (CPS) need to just stop everything until they look at real numbers. That’s why I got active. Because I wanted to at least feel I was doing something. Apathy slays me.”

What advice can she offer new teachers? “*RUN!*” she laughs.

“Seriously,” she adds, “take a deep breath and relax. I know it seems all-consuming and that you will have no life — *forever*, but it actually does get easier. The second year was so much easier than the first, and this year I don’t even worry about it anymore.”

When she looks toward the future and what she might be doing next year, Kristine says, she is tempt-



ed to move up to teaching high school students.

“I guess I don’t do anything the easy way,” she laughs.

“Sure, stay at the school that’s closing...take on extra teaching responsibilities...be the delegate...I have to make things difficult for myself. That’s just how I work. So, maybe high school, I don’t know. I’ll have to see what opens up.” ■

Correction:

In last month’s feature, *Meet a Union Professional*, Brian Hurley was inadvertently identified as a teacher from Morgan Park Academy. Mr. Hurley actually teaches at Morgan Park High School.

Katherine Konopasek, principal at De La Cruz Middle School, says she immediately thought of Kristine Mayle as the “star” she wanted to see recognized at her school because of her “connection with the students.”

“Especially being a special education and resource teacher. She has to know so many different accommodations and modifications for a unique group of students. And each student has their own individual need. Her talent is to make it seem so seamless.

“She gets a wide spectrum of students. From one student we have who doesn’t say anything, to another student who runs away. That’s a big spectrum of students to be able to work with. And 8th grade is a bridge grade. So she’s responsible for teaching them reading, math, and writing now in order for them to graduate. And with the combinations and modifica-



tions, she has to test them all and each one of them have different criteria.

“All of our special ed students made gains,” Ms. Konopasek continues, “How many schools can say that? *Every* special ed student made gains.

It’s nice. Well, not only nice; it shows that it’s working.

“Of course I get tons of compliments on her IEPs from outside sources all the time. Not only doing it correctly but doing it with quantity as well as the quality. She always advocates for the students.

“If we had another school to go to I’d be kidnapping her. She’s a northsider and I’m a southsider but I would go to a northside school if I could bring her with me. She’s really wonderful.

“Whoever picks her up will be very fortunate to have her. It’s terrible to be in this kind of situation.” ■