

Billiken Teacher Corps 'rockstars' focus on community, service and students

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Dave Luecking | daveluecking@archstl.org | twitter: [@stlreviewscribe](https://twitter.com/stlreviewscribe)

John James of St. Louis University referred to the inaugural class of the Billiken Teacher Corps as "rockstars."

"That's the standard we set; our first year out of the chute, they had to be rockstars," said James, the assistant professor in the College of Education and Public Service entrusted with the Corps, along with SLU's Father Christopher Collins, SJ.



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The initial group of seven fit the bill. Culled from a list of 90 and a dozen finalists, they're strong students but even better people. They have concern about the welfare of future students, their communities and faith development in addition to merely their professional development as teachers.

SLU graduate Kelsey Kerr called it a "perfect fit," and Michelle Ehrhard described it as "teaching as ministry."

"Other programs had more emphasis on teaching as a profession, how to make me a better teacher," said Ehrhard, a Truman State graduate from St. Charles. "I wanted it to be about the students I'm teaching instead of about me being a better teacher. This program had that."

The program's three pillars -- service leadership, personal and spiritual formation and an advanced education at SLU -- attracted the students, four of whom are from St. Louis with two recent SLU graduates among the three non-St. Louis natives.

"All the aspects of the three main pillars brought me into program," said Jennifer Bruns, a Xavier University graduate from Cincinnati. "I was looking for a program that allowed me to do service as well as helping me to grow as an educator. I thought this was a great way to become a better person."

The Billiken Teacher Corps' Catholic identity played a role, too.

"That was a big part of it," she said. "I was really interested in growing in faith as a community with a group of people."

Catholic identity also attracted Mitch McCurren, who hails from Indianapolis and recently graduated from SLU. He investigated other teaching programs but chose this one expressly for the Catholic identity.

"That will be a big part of the rest of my life; it's who I am," he said. "Not that I couldn't be formed in another program, but it's really good to be around like-minded people."

"Plus the fact it's in St. Louis ... I wanted to be in St. Louis."

The chance to return to their hometown also was a factor for the four students from the area -- Ehrhard, Sarah Staten, Marjorie Plurad and Elise Earley.

Plurad graduated from Columbia College in Chicago in May 2014 with a degree in film, but "it didn't feel quite right, and I felt like was meant to do something else," she said. She returned home in December and told her mom, Kathy, that she'd "love to teach." Her dad, Bo, supplied information about the SLU program, and the rest, as they say, is history.

"It was a perfect opportunity," said Plurad, who graduated from Holy Redeemer School and Ursuline Academy. "Things fell into place."

Likewise, Earley graduated in May 2014, from Mizzou, and spent a year there as a campus minister through the Catholic Student Association. At one point, she considered getting her master's in education at Columbia College in Columbia, Mo., and pursue teaching at public schools, but Catholic education kept tugging at the Holy Infant School and St. Joseph's Academy graduate.

"I was going into the secular world," she said, with a laugh. "This came out of left field and was more attractive ... an

opportunity to come back to St. Louis and work with people in a similar situation."

In addition to students leaving SLU with master's degrees, they'll gain valuable work experience, and archdiocesan Catholic schools will benefit as well. After graduate classes this summer, the seven will begin teaching gigs in August at Catholic grade schools or high schools in the archdiocese. They'll teach full-time and attend night school during the two-year program. In addition, they're living in the former convent at St. John the Baptist Parish, which is rapidly becoming a hub of activity for the Catholic Church.

"I'm really excited about the idea of helping in my home city," said Ehrhard, who graduated from St. Elizabeth/St. Robert Regional School and Incarnate Word High School. "I had planned to go abroad and teach, but I decided helping in the city I grew up in would be a better way to serve."

Same with Staten, a University of Notre Dame graduate. She investigated a similar program at Notre Dame but didn't fancy the prospect of being placed anywhere in the U.S. She figured she'd return to St. Louis and get a teaching job, but then found out about the Billiken Teacher Corps.

"Oh, my gosh, how could I say, 'No.' It's exactly what I wanted," said Staten, a graduate of St. Mary Margaret Alacoque School and Cor Jesu High School. "It was like God is giving it to me totally on a silver platter."

Billiken Teacher Corps

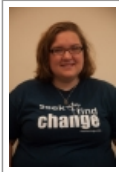


Jennifer Bruns

Bachelor's degree: Xavier University; middle childhood - math and science

Assignment: Christ the Light of the Nations School

"I was looking for a program that allowed me to do service as well as helping me to grow as an educator."

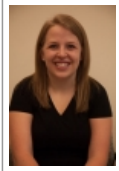


Elise Earley

Bachelor's degree: University of Missouri; biology; religious study

Assignment: St. Cecilia School

"(It's) an opportunity to come back to St. Louis and work with people in a similar situation."

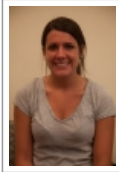


Michelle Ehrhard

Bachelor's degree: Truman State University, psychology

Assignment: Holy Trinity Catholic School

"I wanted it to be about the students I was teaching instead of about me being a better teacher."



Kelsey Kerr

Bachelor's degree: St. Louis University; elementary education

Assignment: St. Francis Cabrini Academy

"I'm going to be teaching and really wanted to get my masters, and I'm Catholic, too. It's a perfect fit."

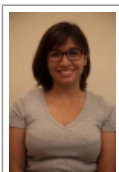


Mitch McCurren

Bachelor's degree: SLU; biology, theology

Assignment: St. Mary's High School

"This seemed to be a good fit for what I was interested in, and it had the Catholic identity."



Marjorie Plurad

Bachelor's degree: Columbia College (Chicago), film

Assignment: Our Lady of Guadalupe.

"It was a perfect opportunity. Things fell into place."

Sarah Staten

Bachelor's degree: University of Notre Dame; theology, math

Assignment: St. Louis the King School at the Cathedral



"I've always wanted to be a teacher. ... I wanted to give back."

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