

Teacher of the Month

Brandon Riley directs students through life's stages

CONTENT BY BRAND AVE. STUDIOS

"I'm not the traditional theatre teacher that comes to mind," says Brandon Riley of Grand Center Arts Academy (GCAA). "The first couple of years, the parents would hear about me and then meet me — and then there's a five- to ten-second reboot period. I'm a decent-sized black male," he says, laughing.

Mr. Riley has taught at GCAA for six years, a school that is also a bit non-traditional. Located in Grand Center, it spans from sixth to 12th grade and focuses on visual and performing arts, such as music, dance and theatre. Grand Center Arts Academy attracts students from high- to low-incomes and across many ethnicities, all factors that drew Mr. Riley to GCAA in the first place. "A huge part of it is that when I was younger, there wasn't a school like it that a variety of students could access," Mr. Riley says.

Growing up in St. Louis, he easily relates to students who, like him, were not raised in an affluent household. But he believes that some things transcend race and class, such as the ability to work through difficult situations, a skill he cultivates in his students. "Consistently, with all of my classes, I make an effort to help them be the best versions of themselves. With that comes dealing with hardship. I operate with more empathy than sympathy, and I can relate to them because of my background. I help them acknowledge the hardships and show them how to move past it while still being their best selves."

As a theatre teacher, he stages two large productions at Grand Center Arts Academy each year — a play in the fall and a musical in the spring. These are interspersed with improv nights, theatre

showcases and middle school ensemble shows. Elsewhere at GCAA, Mr. Riley is a sponsor of the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports program. The purpose of this program is to create effective learning environments rather than focusing on consequences. He has also developed innovative ways to bring students together, such as continually uploading photos from the school's many shows, projects and events to a monitor in the school's lobby.

He has also directed and acted in plays all over the region with companies including St. Louis Shakespeare, Missouri Baptist University and the Kirkwood Theatre Guild. "Boredom isn't one of my challenges," he says.

Ashley Olson, Grand Center Arts Academy's head of school, calls Mr. Riley the best of both worlds. "He fosters

strong relationships with students and also holds them to task, making sure they put forth their best work," she says. "His classroom is a joyful and also a serious learning environment."

His colleague Caitlin Munguia says Mr. Riley goes above and beyond the call of duty in helping his students grow academically, socially and emotionally. "His heart for our students and community can easily be seen in his commitment and dedication. He is passionate and talented, and he uses these strengths to advocate and empower the next generation, as well as his colleagues," Ms. Munguia says. "There is no one more deserving of this award than Mr. Riley."

Being honored as the St. Louis Post-Dispatch's Teacher of the Month came as shock. "I was really surprised

because I didn't even know that I had been nominated. My kids have been clapping for me all day today. It's been really cool," he says. Mr. Riley will receive nearly \$1,000 in gifts from sponsors including First Community Credit Union, Elco Chevrolet, Kenrick's Meats & Catering, Penn Station, Purina Farms and the St. Louis Surge.

No matter what production or program he's involved in, Mr. Riley's focus and motivation is the same. "It's definitely the students," he says. "The moment when you can see students start to acknowledge their own value, when they grow from little kids into young men and women, when they start to see their actual potential and not limit themselves — those moments are priceless."

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Brandon Riley receives a check from Lauren Anderson Koelker. Photo by Denise Kosarek

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