

## Gainesville High School teacher named district's newest Teacher of the Year

During her remarks for the 2021 Robert W. Hughes Teacher of the Year Program, Gainesville High School teacher Nicole Harris compared teaching to a duet that includes both highs and lows, or, in the words of poet Mark Nepo, “wonder and grief.”

“Even before the current time we find ourselves in, all educators can recall being ever so moved by the growth of a student, the same student that caused you the most frustration,” she said. “This is a profession that can delight, thrill, disappoint and discourage all in the same breath.”



Harris is one of 40 teachers who were honored during the annual celebration, which was held virtually due to COVID. The event featured video of each of the teacher honorees working with their students and talking about their goals for those students.

The three finalists for the districtwide honors this year included Harris, Howard Bishop Middle School music teacher Amy Beres and Stephen Foster Elementary School teacher Mackenzie McNickle. All three were introduced by either current or former students.

Brianna Lawrence, who graduated in 2020 and is currently attending SFC, talked about Harris' impact on her students.

“She always made sure that we were all developing a sense of responsibility and learning independence,” said Lawrence. “She was determined to prepare her students for the world outside of high school.”

“While some of my students have never traveled outside of Florida, or Gainesville for that matter, it is my responsibility to create global citizens,” said Harris in outlining her philosophy of teaching. “I teach so students can see humanity first in themselves, their peers and the world at large.”

Harris has been teaching for eight years, all of them at Gainesville High School. She's taught English, English Honors and African/African-American History. She also piloted a writing course for non-traditional students in the Cambridge Program, a rigorous academic program affiliated with Cambridge University in the United Kingdom. Her success helped the school earn the Cambridge Small District of the Year Award in 2019.

Harris has also established programs outside the classroom to promote social awareness and expression among local students, such as the 'Canes on Da Mic Literacy Arts and Civic Engagement organization, which brings together students from all academic levels to compose and recite original poetry about their lives.

Harris credits many of her former teachers with influencing her teaching and helping her develop the activities she uses to reach students, including 'Canes on Da Mic' and the African Diaspora History Fair, a community event that showcased the history of African peoples through performances, informational booths, living history figures and presentations from African professors.

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Following the announcement that she'd been selected as the districtwide Teacher of the Year, Harris praised her fellow teachers for the way they have adjusted to the COVID crisis.

"You are coming up with so many innovative ways to teach," she said. "You've always done it, it's just now the whole world is watching. This is your moment."

This year's Teacher of the Year celebration was organized by The Education Foundation for Alachua County Public Schools and was hosted by the Foundation's Executive Director Rachel Debigare. It also included remarks from Superintendent Dr. Carlee Simon, School Board Chair Dr. Leanetta McNealy, and representatives from the event's primary sponsors, including Cox Communications, Florida Credit Union and SWI Photography.

Each of the school honorees is receiving a \$500 award and other gifts donated by local businesses, organizations and individuals.

Harris will now go on to represent Alachua County Public Schools in the annual Florida Teacher of the Year recognition program. The state will announce a winner in July.

The video of the 2021 Teacher of the Year program is available on the district's YouTube channel at: <https://youtu.be/pGtSF1uQvCg>

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