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Since then, the AJC has cleared out its archives, so it is now only available in the form in which I originally submitted it to Maureen Downey's Get Schooled education blog.



**Great Georgia Teacher Lisa Miller, kindergarten, Moreland Road Elementary School,
Griffin-Spalding County Schools**

By Peter Smagorinsky

The issue of safety in elementary schools has been a topic of national discussion since the tragic events at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut late in 2012. Although opinions vary on how to achieve the goal of ensuring the safety of students, teachers, administrators, and others who occupy the building, everyone agrees on the need for schools to be safe places so that teachers and students can pursue the educational mission with focus and enthusiasm.

For kindergarten teacher Lisa Miller of Moreland Road Elementary School in the Griffin-Spalding County Schools, where she was named the system's Teacher of the Year in 2009, the provision of a safe environment is of paramount importance. Not, however, in the sense that drives the national debate about school safety. Rather, Lisa is concerned with the emotional safety that her students need to feel in order to find school a supportive and nurturing place. "It is my responsibility to create an environment that is positive and conducive to learning," she says. "Students that feel safe to explore their thoughts and ideas will be encouraged to strive to gain more knowledge and skills and will be more likely to continue to seek knowledge once they leave my classroom."

Those of us who have sent our own children to school know what she's talking about. Of course, we want violence-free environments for our school learning. But on a daily basis, we want our children to have the more general feeling of emotional safety, which serves to enable young people—particularly those in preschool and kindergarten programs that provide their first exposure to education and its socialization mission—to navigate their surroundings with the belief that they are in the hands of a caring, dedicated adult. Teachers like Lisa Miller provide such settings, and great Georgia teachers like her have for generations made schools the center of community life, a supportive extension of loving homes, and a harbor for children whose families cannot provide the love and resources that they deserve.

Her principal at Moreland Road Elementary, Stan Mangham, recognizes and appreciates these contributions, saying, "I, along with every parent of every child she has taught, am grateful she is a part of our school and system and wish we had more teachers of her caliber among us. . . . Moreland Road is blessed to have you here educating our children. You possess an uplifting, nurturing spirit and surround your children with love, compassion, and warmth." He describes Lisa as "an outstanding teacher who deserves any and all accolades that come her way. She is very unassuming and never seeks recognition herself, but is very deserving." In addressing her in honor of being the county Teacher of the year, he said, "You represent all that we aspire to be and accomplish day to day tasks with honor, grace, and elegance. You are the face of Moreland Road and we are fortunate to have you as our representative, co-worker, and friend."

Lisa is a native of Griffin-Spalding County and a proud graduate of its public school system, through which she has also sent her own children. After getting her B.A. at Mercer University and master's from Central Michigan, she returned to teach in the Griffin-Spalding County School System in 1990. We call such people "pillars of the community" for a good reason: They provide the generational continuity that sustains values and provides its residents a sense of stability and trust in its institutions.

Lisa illustrates this quality when she says, "As a kindergarten teacher, I know that a child's first teacher is their family and they are sometimes influenced by society. Emphasizing the connection between home, school, and community is important because children's wellbeing is affected by decisions made from each group." Without teachers like Lisa Miller, communities would have a difficult time establishing their identity and believing in its symbols and narrative. Institutions such as public schools would cease to play the central role they have in the formation of its youth's character and foundation for its values. Because of teachers like Lisa, public schools earn the public trust and sustain its support over time.

Lisa's excellence as a teacher is evident in the testimonials given by those who surround her. She is, says one admirer, "the epitome of a teacher. She goes to sleep each night dreaming about her class and wakes up thinking of ways in which she can be a better leader for the 20 or so young minds that she encounters each day. As a kindergarten teacher, she understands that it is her responsibility to provide a firm educational foundation that will last her students the rest of their lives. . . . Our family and friends have long since known how dedicated you are to your craft. We are all proud that you are getting the public recognition you deserve. Congratulations from a very proud son! (I feel like you should have a crown or something)." OK, so [that's her son speaking](#). But I'd be proud too.

Her colleagues appreciate her presence at Moreland Road Elementary as well. Fellow teacher Linda Birath has written, "Congratulations! No one deserves this [Teacher of the Year] honor more. I am so glad I had the privilege of working with you over the years. It has always been obvious that you love the children and you love your 'job.' It is great that you have finally been recognized for the wonderful job you have always done. You are much more than a teacher. You are a role model for life and your Christian values show in everything you do. I am blessed to be able to call you my friend."

Ms. Birath makes several points worth emphasizing. One is her placement of “job” in quotation marks, suggesting that Lisa Miller epitomizes Confucius’s ancient wisdom: “Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life.” Like any great teacher, Lisa undertakes her work with a passion that makes it a labor of love, a disposition that appears to be shared by many of her friends and colleagues in Griffin and Spalding Counties.

The second concerns Ms. Birath’s grounding of Lisa’s dedication to teaching in her religious faith. In a previous profile in this series of [Bettina Polite Tate](#), I made a similar point, one that was received with varying degrees of acceptance by the article’s commenters. I should reiterate that I am not personally a religious person, and so am not using Lisa’s example to convert you to any particular faith. What I do see in Lisa’s embodiment of Biblical values is her embrace of her savior’s value on compassion. No matter what serves as its motivation, compassion is a quality that great teachers have, in that it drives them to care for students in profound and meaningful ways. They care about their academic development, but just as importantly they care for and nurture their growth as good citizens, family members, friends, and loved ones. Ultimately, those qualities are at least as important as any scores on math or spelling tests.

Lisa’s classroom excellence is only part of her work for her community. She has worked for the March for Babies, a March of Dimes charity that provides assistance for families so that their babies begin life healthy and ready for life’s challenges. I see this volunteer work going hand-in-hand with her decision to teach at the kindergarten level, a time of great sensitivity to students in their physical, emotional, and academic development. Lisa has also given her time to make sure that children’s potential is realized later in life, serving as chair to a Jabberwock Foundation fundraiser. (Jabberwock is sponsored by the Griffin Area Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.) You might recall the Jabberwock from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*, as a king who annually had the creatures of his kingdom put on a show. The Jabberwock Foundation is dedicated to community service on behalf of girls, such as the scholarship fundraiser that Lisa chaired, the sort of gala event hosted by the Jabberwock, yet with a more benevolent spirit.

In past articles for the AJC’s Get Schooled blog, I have made the case that teachers are the heart and soul of every school. Lisa Miller shows how big that heart can be, and the kind of soul it grows. Lisa Miller is more than a teacher in an isolated room of kids. She has a bigger presence, one that uplifts her school and community and makes the educational experience critical and fulfilling. That’s hard to measure with numbers, but tangible in terms of the inspiration and care that people recognize in her contributions. That’s my kind of teacher, and one all Georgians can be proud to have in our schools.