



2013 Brock International
Prize in Education Nominee

Mark D. Williams

Nominated by Lori L. Lamb



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INTRODUCTION

Mark D. Williams is an English, Speech and Multimedia teacher at North Heights Alternative School in Amarillo, Texas. Williams is an award-winning author and teacher who began teaching at age 40 after a career as both a sportswriter and business owner.

Williams' students have produced numerous national books, ebooks, magazine and newspaper articles, videos, documentaries and Public Service Announcements. Their 4Ever4Everyone Campaign, which informed students about digital citizenship and internet permanency, was a student-created series of award-winning PSAs, website, contests and posters and won the best school campaign in Texas (2010.)



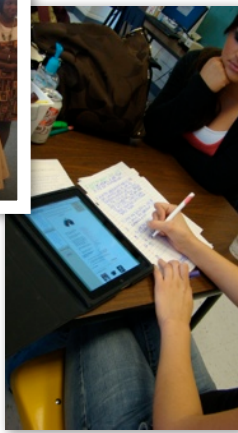
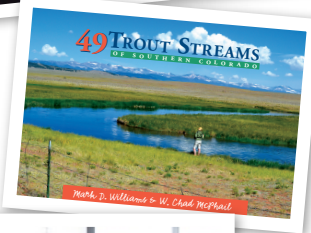
In September, his students will be the first high school class in America to produce a professional app for the iTunes store (in partnership with Sutro Media.) His students are producing one of the first digital crowd-sourced iBooks, an electronic, multimedia book of essays, *Through A Prism*, written by hundreds of students from numerous high schools (publication date, October 2012.)

Williams regularly travels to schools to provide writing workshops for both teachers and students since one of his passions is to create more authentic writing and find a more balanced literacy in our schools.

His students embrace alternative education and technology. His class has been an iPad Pilot Program, his students created the official newsroom for their school district. His class is one of the first to produce a regular news-blog for their school district, was one of the first in the country to produce electronic books. He is proud of their numerous student-centered projects including the long-running Papparazzi Coffeeshop because those profits have generated tens of thousands of dollars of scholarships for these at-risk kids. Williams and North Heights Alternative School have long been at the vanguard of alternative education as well as being a mentor school to hundreds of other alternative education schools.

Williams loves the challenge of working with at-risk students in alternative education and believes that in these small class settings with students open to creative disobedience, he and his students can break rules, capitalize on their unique backgrounds, create and innovate, forge authentic and relevant projects, and together become partners in their lifetime learning. Williams believes that by integrating sound educational philosophies (many of which were created by former Brock nominees) with realistic, rigorous, organic and relevant in-class practices, alternative education can be a working example of how education, traditional included, must change to meet the needs of these complex students.

Williams is the author of twenty books, several apps (education, sports and travel) including *Tips for New Teachers*, an iTunes App (publication date, Summer 2013) and hundreds of magazine and newspaper articles. He has won Teacher of the Year Awards. He has taught Education classes at Amarillo College. His students' two print books (and now iBooks), *Voices from the Heights* and *Paintings on the Walls* are still in print and inspiring students throughout the world. Williams feels that he is the luckiest man on earth getting to do what it is he does. Teach.



Amarillo 365: A Tourism App in iTunes and Sutro World (in partnership with Sutro Media and Amarillo Convention and Visitor Center / Chamber of Commerce) [Link](#)

Transitions: A Documentary. Presented at the Concert Hall at Amarillo College to public. [Link #1](#). [Link#2](#). [Link#3](#). [Link#4](#).

iPad Pilot Program. On [Youtube](#). and [Link#2](#).

Voices from the Heights. [Book](#). Amazon, Barnes and Noble. [Review of book](#).

Paintings on the Walls. [Book](#). Amazon, Barnes and Noble.

The North Heights Scrapbook Cookbook, [Amazon](#), Barnes and Noble.

Voices and Paintings from the Heights, [iBooks](#), iTunes.



Voices and Paintings from the Heights, ebook, [Amazon Kindle](#), Nook.

Paintings on the Walls, ebook, Amazon Kindle, Nook.

Voices from the Heights, ebook, [Amazon Kindle](#), Nook.

Student-written articles in [national magazines](#) and several have written books

Outstanding Public Service Announcement Campaign for Texas, 2011 (4ever4everyone Campaign, 4ever4everyone Youtube Channel, Online Awareness Safety) [Sample award-winning videos: Link #2. Link#3. Link #4.](#)

The North Heights Scrapbook Cookbook, ebook, Amazon Kindle, Nook.

Crowd-sourced iBook with five high schools for iTunes (publication date, October 2012)

Tips for New Teachers iTunes App (publication date, Summer 2013)
Inspirational Teacher of the Year, Stop Film Fest 2012
Sam's Club Teacher of the Year, 2007.

AISD Teacher of the Year, 2007. [Link to video.](#)

North Heights Teacher of the Year, 2007.

Outstanding Book of the Year, Texas Outdoor Writers Association, 2002 and 2007.

Director of Newswire Program ([News Online Service for AISD](#), student-written and student-directed videos, includes a blog with 4,000 readers and an app-in-progress of same), [numerous awards](#).

Special Video Projects for AISD (Dana Center, PARC, Portraits, etc.) [Link](#).

Portraits Magazine (featured [Amarillo 365 App](#))
Student articles and editorials published in Amarillo Magazine and Amarillo Globe News. A [sample editorial](#) and [article](#).

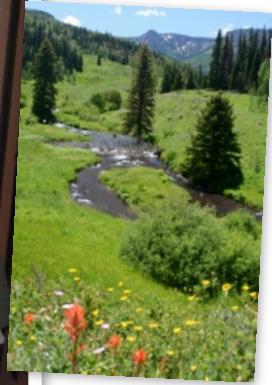
Amarillo Magazine features (numerous 2002-2012)

Taught Education at Amarillo College

Taught at Texas A & M University and North Central Texas College

iPad Pilot Program for North Heights 2013 (one-to-one technology, use of ebooks for textbooks, individualized curriculum for students on the iPad, etc.)





Books: Author and Editor

[Amazon Bio and Catalog](#)

Trout Fishing Sourcebook, Menasha Ridge Press, 1994

The Backpacking Flyfisher, Menasha Ridge Press, 1997

Knots for Flyfishers, Menasha Ridge Press, 1998

Flyfishing Southwestern Colorado, Wayfinder Press, 1999

Top 100 Mountain Vacations USA, Willow Creek Press, 1999

Trout Fishing Map Book: Southwest: A Guide to the Classic Streams and Lakes, Menasha Ridge Press, 2001

Freshwater Fly Fishing Tips from the Pros, Fireside Simon & Schuster, 1997

Voices from the Heights, North Heights Press, 2007

Paintings on the Wall, North Heights Press, 2009

The North Heights Scrapbook Cookbook, North Heights Press, 2010

So Many Fish, So Little Time, Harper Collins, 2009

Top 30 Things to Do in Durango, Wayfinder Press, 2010

Top 30 Things to Do in Telluride, Wayfinder Press, 2010

The Bedside Diaries, Granfalloon Press, 2010

Colorado Flyfishing: Where to Eat, Sleep and Fish, Johnson, 2010

Voices and Paintings from the Heights (iBook), North Heights Press, 2010

So You Want To Flyfish? Stonefly Press, 2013

49 Trout Streams of Southern Colorado, University of New Mexico Press, 2013

35 Top Flyfishing Spots of the Southwest, from Stonefly Press, 2013



Apps

Freshwater Flyfishing Tips from the Pros (Sutro Media 2011)

Top 100 Tips for Teachers (Sutro Media, 2013)

Sports' Greatest Sound Bytes (Sutro Media, 2013)

Magazines and Newspapers

SPORT

Dallas Morning News

Fort Worth Star Telegram

Beckett's

Mens Health

Mens Journal

Inside Sports

Sporting News

Baseball Digest

Football Digest

Basketball Digest

Southwest Fly Fishing

Eastern Fly Fishing

Texas Game and Fish

Field and Stream

ESPN Outdoors

Outdoor Life

West Texas Historical Quarterly

Boys Life

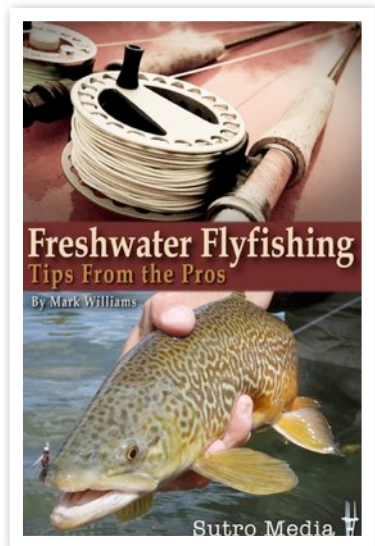
Houston Chronicle

Houston Post

Texas Outdoors

Amarillo Globe News

Amarillo Magazine



Cowboys and Indians

Backpacker

New Mexico Outdoors

Wild on the Fly

Colorado Outdoors

Streamside

Lubbock-Avalanche Journal

West Texas Historical Quarterly

Texas Rangers Program

And many others

Online Publications: Outdoorsite.com, Gorp (Editor and Contributor), Tibesti (Angling Expert), ESPN, ESPNOutdoors, Dallas Morning News and numerous others.

Director-Editor: Numerous documentaries including PARC Video for New Teacher Academy (Relationships: Content, Colleagues and Students), The Future Classroom (the A-Team), A Digital Conversation (a student-response to The Future Classroom), and many others.

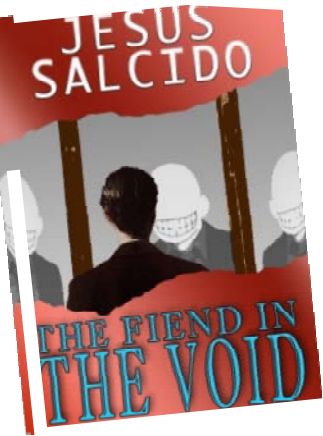
App Developer: Williams is now also an iPad/iPhone app author -- his app, Freshwater Flyfishing From the Pros has 250 tips and 1000 photos from all the big names in the sport and many from guys and gals in the trenches, the ones who guide newbies daily.

Speaker: Latin American Baseball Hall of Fame (presenter), Texas Association for Alternative Education (presenter), Texas Middle School Association (presenter), Amarillo College (keynote), Panhandle Professional Writers Association (keynote, presenter), Texas Outdoor Writers Association (keynote), Amarillo Education Foundation (keynote), Xcel Energy (keynote), Writing Seminars and Getting Published seminars (numerous presentations, keynotes around the country.) [Sample](#) and [Sample #2](#).

Texas A & M University, McMurry University: Outstanding Pre-Law Student 1983, Outstanding English Student 1984, Sigma Tau Delta.

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The United States of America takes pride in offering an education to ALL students. The challenges presented often require a new approach, a new setting, a new opportunity to explore strengths, weaknesses and in establishing trust with the educator that is encountered daily. The need for alternative education continues to become progressively more important as education develops in new directions. Alternative education has been the place where students that are not being successful get a new opportunity. Educators like Mark Williams pour their life passions of creating better futures for our students into constant project based, high rigor, incredibly relevant activities after relationships are initially established. These skills open new doors to success.

Brent Benda, from the AR Legislative Research Bureau noted many aspects about alternative education. "The fundamental premise underlying ALE is that all students can learn if the right educational environment is provided. A companion premise assumes that all students should have the opportunity to learn and to achieve a quality of life they desire based on their educational efforts and achievements. Alternative education also offers school and community leaders the opportunity to fulfill their legal responsibility to provide an adequate education for all students, since data do indicate that "at risk" students do not learn well and do not adjust in a traditional classroom (AR Bureau of Legislative Research, 2006; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Lehr, Tan, & Ysseldyke, 2009)".

Within the current context of raising achievement and graduation rates, and decreasing the prevalence of remediation (Southern Regional Education Board, 2009), the number of states that have legislation regarding alternative education has risen from 22, or 44%, to 48, or 96%, in the past decade (Lehr et al., 2009).

The solution for part of the education crisis America is facing lies in the relevant meaningful skills learned in the classroom. If learning isn't achieved, has teaching actually occurred? As a facilitator of learning, Mark Williams presents opportunities with enthusiasm, research, skills, technology; he expounds topics to such a degree the previously challenging students are eager to commit personal effort to "master the challenge instead of being the challenge to be mastered". Mark Williams represents all classroom teachers that look into the eyes of their students daily and express the joy of learning, sharing perplexed challenges that are encountered while research methods are used to prove or disprove a hypothesis. He embraces STEM activities while advancing students through the use of new technology. The significant national impact Mark continues to make on behalf of learning for all students is demonstrated by the many accomplishments listed in this interactive portfolio. It is with great pride and admiration that I present, Mark Williams as the 2013 nominee for our Brock International Education Award.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lori L. Lamb".

Lori L. Lamb

Arkansas Alternative Education Director
President, National Alternative Education Association

Biography, Professional Background, Vision and Beliefs

I watch from a plastic-molded chair about six-feet away from the group. Seven high school seniors sit around a table. Kinnzey, Addy, Maryssa, Garrett, Myles, Gloria and Ashley. Their subject matter? Finishing up an iTunes app they've created, a tourism app of Amarillo Texas, the first professional app written by high school students in the entire country. For four months, they have turn-keyed this app --- organizing, interviewing, researching, writing, editing and now, after one-hundred students have contributed to the project, the end is in sight. I sip a cup of hot coffee, shuffling papers, pretending not to watch their meeting, their back and forth chatter. I work with a few other students and their individual projects but I'm listening to my App Group much of the time.

“Call them and find out their hours.”

“Anyone want to team up and hit Sixth Street?”

“How about you taking these restaurants and get photos for them?”

“We still have to set up a meeting with the Restaurant Association. Who wants to write the email?”

I am one happy teacher. These students are what we wish for as teachers --- self-directed learners. You never know about this education thing, believe me. Best-laid plans go awry.

The Amarillo 365 App Team wasn't always running along so smoothly. When we first started forming the team, I promised myself I would stay out of their way, guide and direct but not interfere. To truly learn, they'd have to struggle, fail, recover, reorganize and progress. Easier said than done. It's like watching your kid hammer a nail and keep mis-hitting and bending that nail. You want to grab the hammer and “show” them how it's done. But if you have patience and tolerance, the results will come and these students will hammer the nail home.

I teach in an ideal setting. My job is to teach Senior English at North Heights Alternative School, a program for at-risk students. The perception is often that these are trouble-kids but the truth is that they are simply cut from a different cloth. This is not your father's high school.

Think back to your high school years. Remember how difficult it could be to get along with those not like you? Other cliques? How group work meant that the smartest and the rule-followers did all the work? Not so with the App Team. They've overcome those problems. The same behavior and psychological dynamic that made them unsuccessful in traditional classrooms makes them receptive and willing to try this new approach.

This group does things they never thought they could do. They meet with local business owners. They use cutting-edge technology, write up editorial reviews of local eateries, create marketing plans. Sure, I direct and guide and help here and there but this is their project. I'm letting them hammer away.

This is an ambitious project. But I've found with this generation, if it's bigger, better, faster, if it involves technology, if it is relevant to their lives, if it's challenging and if it's authentic, they like it more and do better. If you've ever had doubts about this generation, don't. Provide them with technology, relevance and motivation and they'll blow the doors off.

I want them to sink or swim. At first, they dog paddle, float on their back, at first but by now, they are crossing English Channels. Still, the blitz is coming, the critiques, the sales, and the television and print interviews. They'll pass those challenges too, I have no doubt. They own it. They are prepared. They'll adjust along the way. They are at the top of the depth of knowledge.

They have little clue that what they're doing is what we call 21st Century Skills, those elements of behavior and knowledge that they'll need to succeed in the real world, skills like creativity, collaboration, communication.



The app began last year, the brain child of students' Kevin McKinney and Lizzie Romero. These two realized that with six million tourists passing through Amarillo annually, an iTunes app was a gold mine for scholarships. We partnered up with app publisher Sutro Media and after setting up the framework, turned it over to these Program Directors.

The app will be out in Fall 2012 and will sell for \$2.99 through the iTunes store, Android store and Sutro World app. For every download to an iPhone or iPad or Android phone, the students will receive a buck in royalties. From that cache, those students who worked on the app will receive scholarships, 100+ strong. They have a vested interest in producing a quality product for the public. Talk about authentic and relevant.



Leadership at the high school level is a strange thing. Some charge forward and lead, some lead by default, some lead because others defer. Kinnzey leads by taking charge. Others follow her. Simple math.

Addy and Maryssa lead in more reserved ways, more with the other student-writers. I named these three Program Directors from the git-go because of their ability to get things done, work with others, learn the technology. They have become business owners to a large degree. They have failed many times along the way but I made them read Dweck's *Mindset* and they got it, no more fixed mindset. They learned the technology themselves (with my occasional intrusion) and taught to the other one-hundred students how to use iPad, Dropbox, web-based app software, Google Docs, HD cameras and anything else that they realized could help produce a first-rate app.

Kinnzey Yarbrough was in a national commercial when she was a child, was a model on a doll box but that matters not to the others. She has earned her role and is the defacto leader of the app. She wants to study to be an RN or a teacher. Think that she won't be using technology? Leading others? Collaborating with others? You can see why building this app was important to her. She has bronchitis, has to miss some and she let's me know that she is sorry she's having to miss – I assure her that she and her team have trained the others, set up a unit ---- she comes in on days when she is so sick, she certainly should have stayed home in bed but the app is too important. She has ownership.



Maryssa Aldape is the quiet one of the PDs, our resident critic. She asks the tough questions, wonders aloud if this is the right way or the only way to accomplish the task. You need a skeptic in every project, a truth-finder. Maryssa is also accomplished in getting others to finish their assignments. From a teacher's standpoint, that's invaluable.

Addy Palmer is a bundle of energy, a quasar of a learner. The student who came to North Heights in August is simply not the same person anymore. She is not only a leader, in Kinnzey's absence, she became the leader. Meeting? She'll take it. Things to do, to write, to photograph? She'll do it.

Gloria Enriquez and Brianda Mendoza were on the outside looking in. They weren't even in my class but they saw that they had something to contribute (they told me they simply "had" to be a part of something so 'exciting.' These two enterprising young ladies looked for openings (writing individual entries, taking photos) and when they saw daylight, they ran through it. Myles Longcor and Garrett Malkuch help balance out five females by bringing to it steadiness and a male perspective. Ashley Willis is the artist but also a do-er. What a team. Daily, I have to run most of them out of the classroom long after school is over.

The meeting of the minds is over. Myles and Garrett grab a camera and hustle out to shoot photos along Sixth Street. Maryssa selects icons for several entries. Addy and Ashley sort through each entry looking for anomalies. Kinnzey crafts correspondence. Without these students, without all one-hundred contributors, the app would ring hollow. They all brought personality to it. Through process and hard work, they made the app appealing to the public. The program directors provided vision and direction. As Addy said the other day in her typical chipper manner, "it's amazing how we all came together once we realized we were a part of something bigger than us." Like I say, I am one happy teacher.

I came to Amarillo from Dallas ten years ago --- sportswriter, book author, freelance photographer, business owner. I traveled the world. This past month, I finished and turned in my 21st book and signed deals for two more.

I had taught a few years at college, TAMU, North Central College – but had tired of the college politics. Maybe they had tired of me, I don't know. I did know this --- I didn't know what I wanted to do when I grew up.

I have owned several businesses, edited magazines, written for national magazines and newspapers, traveled to 100+ countries, interviewed celebrities and sports stars. But teaching was in my blood.

My wife Amy was from Amarillo, Caprock class of '84, and we needed to get away from the traffic and density and worries of DFW. I knew little of Amarillo except for visits at Christmas and times I passed through to get to the mountains, Big Texan, Toot and Totums, used car lots on every corner (churches on the other) and Cherry Limeades. Amy assured me this was a great place to live and to find my story. So I left Big D and went to the Panhandle to take a teaching job at Travis Middle School.

All I really knew was that I wanted to become that type of teacher who I had always wanted to teach me. I remembered back to my favorite teachers and it was how they made me feel, how they inspired me. That's what I wanted to be.

I visited teachers during office hours to get a better read on their evil plans, I would even read contrarian outside texts so as to be more challenged in class and to challenge them ---- for instance, I'd read an alternative historical opinion to the Pearl Harbor affair or pick up books by Edith Hamilton and Joseph Campbell so I'd know more than the usual Greek and Roman mythology. I hated to sit through classes where I was taught what I already knew.

I could write an entire senior research paper on the day before it was due.

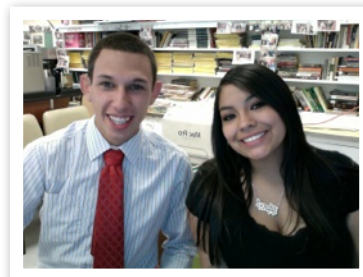
And I did. So the Bottom line ... I was bored and frustrated with school. I was looking for my way, searching for my story. I wanted meaning to my story.

I always knew I would be a writer and I owe that knowledge to my senior English teacher. I was up til then what he later called a gold star writer. I wrote to impress teachers with description and craft. My first big paper for him, I expected the usual 100 and rave reviews. I did not get that. I got an F and a This Sucks written in big red ink.

I complained. He explained. He told me the truth --- he said that if I really wanted to be a writer, I needed to find my voice and find my story. Quit the obfuscation and flowery language. Get to the point.

I listened. I made an A for the class but that didn't matter all that much. I became a writer. Thanks Mr. Carlton. Even though I became a writer, I harbored this thought that if I might become a teacher and if I ever became a teacher, I knew one thing – I was going to do these things:

- Talk **with** not **at** students.
- Create reasons beyond an assignment to want to be in class.
- Try to make assignments come alive and be challenging.



I didn't know it at the time but that was the basis for so much of good education I encountered thirty years later --- relationships, relevance and rigor.

At Travis Middle School, the first class of my first day, I turned my back to write on the board and two girls started busting each other up. I separated them but one got in a last blow – nose split open --- Blood on my clothes. Coffee spilled. Pride injured. Welcome to Amarillo.

A couple of months later, I was a wreck. 30 kids in a class, Harry Wong wasn't working, I was testy and wondering if the *Dallas Morning News* sports editor had really read my resignation letter. Maybe I could live with the one-hour commute after all. Principals were on us for alignment and TAKS and rigor and behavior. Meetings galore. I was bored and frustrated.

One day in class, I saw this one kid in the back not working. He was drawing. I had done some trainings that talked about not putting kids on blast, not tearing them up in front of the class so I decided to wait til the end of class and lay into him. Sacrificial lamb time. He kept drawing all period long, never wavering, never looking up. I was getting madder than a hornet.



The Bell rang and he got up and walked toward me. I bit my tongue til the right moment. He laid the paper on my desk, proudly, smiling. I made this for you, Mr. Williams. He had drawn a picture of he and I in class, the sun shining high the sky through the window, our arms raised in triumph, the words, *You are my favorite teacher ever, Friends Forever.*

So I realized I was not the teacher I had wanted to become so right then and there, I took my intuition and reinvented my approach.

I didn't know what to call it then but I know now, I became a **director of my class culture.**

"I believed then and I believe today that we need interaction among students, faculty, local industry and the community to generate new ideas, new products and services to enhance the lives of people."



I wanted a spirit of collaboration in my class that would lead to creativity and community.

I wanted it throughout my other teachers but I quickly learned that old habits were hard to break.

I had to break the patterns I had learned in the past --- stand at the lectern, wear a tie, give a long lecture, shock them with a pop test, create a huge test with all kinds of gotcha questions then move on to the next chapter in the textbook. It didn't work for me and I was a top student. How could it work for those who weren't ?

They were bored and frustrated.

Before I created rigor and relevance and relationship, I had to figure out how to motivate the students to allow those three things to happen. Before I could figure it out, I got hired at North Heights PASS Program.

We are helping students think about what their future might look like...there *is* more...what *is* there? Education, mastering new skills, better jobs...whatever...if we assist them in believing that it can happen to them, then it is possible. I teach. That means that I find ways with every student to teach them to learn. I treat every student to the same standard I expect a teacher to teach my kid, my daughter. That's my high standard. Treat each student as I would my own child. I owe them that. We all owe them that.

MDW Philosophy

Pin-Up Board

Create transparent, connected learning community

Push limits

Find the best in each student

Employ Authentic projects

Work authentically with community

Create life-learning partnerships

Break the rules

Prepare the students for success after life

Life Coaching is the main part of my job

Sliding, modular, flexible curriculum

Differentiation held to a higher standard

Create colleagues in Wrap-Around Services

All students are at risk

21st Century Skills, Soft-people Skills

Expect, inspire, create -- Me. Them.

Collaborate

Technology as language

Make my classroom bigger, your vision wider

Find ways to reveal character and leadership

Ongoing Open Informal Assessment --- change how we assess mastery -- Use Depth of Knowledge with Creativity at top

Content AND Concept

Relevance relationship and rigor but esp. relationship





*Student-centered learning.
Student achievement.*

Hello.

I am a student in Mr. Williams alternative ed. English class.

I should begin by telling you that I'm here for a lot of reasons, most of them things I'd rather you not know. I am embarrassed by them.

I am black. I am white. I am red and yellow and brown. I am a National Merit Scholar who just attempted suicide. I am a nineteen-year old boy who is homeless. I am a seventeen-year old girl who has one child; and I am pregnant with another. I am twenty-years old and I live with my parents, who are both invalid as is my sister and I take care of all three. I am the starting quarterback for one of the Amarillo high schools and I make good grades but I skipped so many classes, I might not even graduate if I don't do well here.

You should know that I am doing well in my classes here. Hey, I'm as surprised as you are. If you looked at my transcripts you can see right off the bat that typically, in traditional schools, success was not the case for me. I don't want you to think that these better grades are the best way to judge me. Judge me based on so many other things.

I come to school every day now.

I haven't been in a fight yet this year and don't plan on it.

I have held this job at Taco Bell for six months, longer than I've ever held any job.

I spoke to my mother the other day and I did so in a pleasant tone.

I haven't thought about suicide since I got here.

I like my teachers. I love Mr. Williams.

I like Biology (but don't tell Ms. Davis.)

I am pregnant and I am scared. The teachers and students know, and we're all family so it's comforting. I see other mothers, other pregnant girls and I get all the info and well, everything's okay in the world for me for awhile.

I made a 96 on my Senior Project in Mr. Williams class. I wasn't surprised. I worked for days and days, hours and hours on the computer, on the ipad, interviewing other students and other teachers, learning the software, doing more researching and reading and writing and rewriting and letting other students look it over and talking with Mr. Williams about it every day. A 96? I was disappointed, honestly, even though it was one of the best grades I ever made in any class. And it's not about the grade, honest. I did it. I completed something bigger than me and I had fun doing it. Next time, I know what to do to make the presentation better. The next time might be college. Oh yeah, I've decided I am going to college in the fall now.

I talk to other students (which I never used to do.) And I speak to Nerds and Goat-ropers and Goths and Emos and Preps and Skaters and all types of kids I never ever used to speak to.

You are probably wondering what happened here at North Heights to get me going in the right direction. I thought about it all last night and I came up with a few things but honestly, putting a finger on the exact thing is difficult.

First off, I want to take a lot of the credit. I am learning. Learning is about me not them.

Secondly, from the moment I sat down and got interviewed by Mr. Williams (we call him Mr. W), sitting in the chair by his desk, hearing about how things work at NHAS, understanding that I had a partner in this learning process, my learning process, I was on board. You talk about feeling comfortable, safe, this is the place.

The teachers know my name. They know where I work and what music I listen to and who my brother is and I am reading a book one of them loaned me (I haven't read a book in years by the way) and I am loving it. These teachers, well, they're cool. I wouldn't tell them that. Mr. W is like a father and I do not want to disappoint him. In traditional school, teachers were always out to catch me doing something. Not here. They are out to make me feel in charge of my own learning, to make me want to make them proud, make me proud. And it's working. I am making me proud (and Mr. W told me he is proud too.)

I slipped up for a week or two in the fall. My, take your choice--- a) father beat my mother and kicked both of us out of the house and we were homeless; or b) my baby's Daddy didn't pay child support and I had to take the baby to the doctor and I didn't have any money and I know that's not an excuse but . . . or c) I was afraid of all this success. I'm not used to it; or d) I had to work two jobs to make ends meet or e) I don't want to leave. I know that sounds weird but I'm not the only one who says it. I love coming to school now. I can't wait to show off this essay I wrote for Mr. W. I made cookies for all the teachers. I am in charge of the Bake Sale, I am on the panel for Brain Brawl (our Academic Bowl), I was on Channel 7 interviewed by Sarah Davidson the other night, I finished the book proposal and we're sending it off to an agent today, I finished my first album and I can't wait to let the teachers hear it, I passed the TAKS Review test with flying colors, I am making an app with other directors, I met with a business owner, I am sober and fairly happy, I am the editor of the Fringe, our school newspaper and we're on deadline.

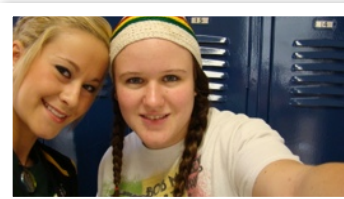
Why am I successful here? I take two steps forward and one step back some days. Some weeks even. But I know I am moving forward. The teachers give me honest evaluations. They care for me as a student but more as a person. We have invested in **me** together. All of them. Even other students. They care too. It's just plain weird how much like a family this seems. I know some background on each of my teachers --- they're real people too. I sit and talk at lunch with teachers I have never even taken a class from. Mr. Leach, the principal, knows my name and we had a five-minute conversation the other day about a book we've both read. How cool is that? And don't think I'm the only student who thinks this school is awesome --- ask the other students. You'll see. I'm not the only one.

I think I want to be a teacher now when I grow up. I want to reach people and make a difference too. I watch Mr. Williams too and I want to be like him. I want to tell him that but it's too early. It's funny. Before I got here, I thought of North Heights as that place where the bad kids go. I had no idea how wrong I was. All schools should be like this. I hear the other kids and they agree. The self-direction. The ownership of learning. Learning all this technology. Jump starting myself. Learning things my buddies at the home schools aren't learning (believe me, when I find this stuff out, I really rub it in.) Things are starting to sink in. I have control of little things. I am learning to control my actions from class to class, day to day and I have hope. Go figure. I heard it was easy. It kinda is. But not like you think.

Easy. Easy because learning in and of itself is fun and fluid and dynamic. Almost every one here passes the TAKS. I did. Self-pacing means that when I miss a week because I'm in the hospital or jail or to go out of town, when I get back, I can pick it up where I left off; I'm not behind the entire class because we're all in different places in the course.

When you make progress, when you complete tasks, when you set goals and meet them, when you please your teacher and yourself, how can that be called hard? Difficult? No way. People who are successful work hard, work smart and live life like that and you call that easy. Living life like I used to is hard. Difficult. Skipping, lying, cheating. That's difficult. I know that now.

I didn't make it to school yesterday. I called the counselor to let her know that my car broke down. My father got out of jail. I had a miscarriage. I was presented an award at my church. I was on a DECA trip. I took a friend to the emergency room. I was evicted. I was in jail. I had to work an extra day to pay the rent. I had to babysit my siblings because my mother never came home last night. My brother has cancer and I took him for chemo. My father died. I was working on a project for my home school. I'm not gonna lie --- I still struggle. But things are getting better.



I come to school because I feel safe. I do feel safe. Some teacher's rooms are dark and have soft music and you can feel the patience and softness. Some rooms are light and lively. I like both.

I like learning now. I am not self-conscious. I am not the class clown. We're all in this together. I want to make something out of myself. I want to go to college. I am the first one in my family to graduate.

Last thing. I was sitting in class the other day and something hit me. I shuddered. What if. What if I hadn't been lucky enough to end up here. Where would I be? Would I have finished? Could I have finished? I looked around Mr. Williams' classroom and I saw students of all kinds, from all walks of life and I know their stories and I know that if they had missed this experience, they too would shudder, shiver. What if.

I am a student at North Heights PASS side in Mr. W's class. I am many things. I am successful for many reasons. I owe them for letting me discover the me I want to be, the student, the student I am supposed to be. I owe a lot of people but I owe a lot to me, too. I am many things and what you have just read is an amalgamation of students my teachers have taught at North Heights over the years. These are their stories, our stories, my story. True stories. These are their, our words, my words. True words. These are our successes.

Thank you for your patience. If you need anything else, you know where you can find me. But you better hurry because I am about to graduate. How do I know? The teachers gave me a goodbye letter, a real personal letter, and each of them signed it and told me all kinds of nice things, congratulations and all that. I'll see you around. I'll be your nurse, your doctor; your mechanic, your butcher, your lawyer and teacher.

'Voices' touches readers

Anthology opens window into life of teen in today's world



By Bruce Beck
Amarillo Globe-News ([link to follow up story](#))



I was all set to join the community-wide book club Amarillo Reads and start on its first selection, "Cold Sassy Tree," when Mark Williams handed me a copy of "Voices From the Heights."

"Cold Sassy Tree" will have to wait; I was hooked on "Voices" by the third page.

Williams, a teacher at North Heights Alternative School and a published author, is enthused over the publication of "Voices From the Heights," which he edited with Renee Shackelford and former student Abril Vazquez.

"It's been four years in the making," Williams said of the anthology that includes short stories, poetry and musings of 72 current and former students at North Heights, a campus for children who are at risk of dropping out and, for some, a last chance to succeed, or, to quote the school's Web site: "recover and prepare at-risk students into becoming self-directed learners, developing an understanding of the rules of society, meeting and accepting challenges and finding life fulfillment."

When I first started "Voices From the Heights," I began reading as an editor. I saw the flaws; I saw where the writing could have been improved. I saw all kinds of things not to like about the book.

But that holier-than-thou attitude only lasted about halfway through Vazquez's welcoming missive. When I stopped reading as an adult and started listening to what the teenagers had to say - not how they said it - I flashed back to my teenage years, as the earnest messages of these present-day young people burst from the pages.

Even though I grew up on the mean streets of suburban New York, I led a sheltered teenage life. I didn't have to deal with racism, or even think about it except in the abstract. I was an angry teenager: angry at all authority, angry at the government, angry at my parents for divorcing, angry at my teachers for not understanding my anger. I wore my emotions on my sleeve.

I was a typical teenager.

Teenage pregnancy undoubtedly existed back then, but it didn't touch anyone I knew. My peers and I debated the issues of the day - the Vietnam War, civil rights, the war on poverty - but we did it from the safety of the classroom, secure in the knowledge that once we left high school, we'd be protected from the draft by student deferments.

Many of the writers in "Voices" found a safe haven at North Heights Alternative School and are not shy about telling how they ended up there and their amazement at what they found when they arrived - a caring, nonjudgmental staff that looks beyond the surface to the potential that lies beneath.

The children whose writings populate "Voices" are young single mothers, children of single-parent households, liberals, conservatives, idealists, cynics, pro-President Bushies, anti-President Bushies, drug-users, former drug-users, friends of drug-users, the children of drug-users.

They are us.

So many of the writers in "Voices" unflinchingly chronicle mistakes they've made in their young lives, admit them and chronicle their journeys back from them. Some of the stories are heartbreaking but there seem to be more that have elements of hope.

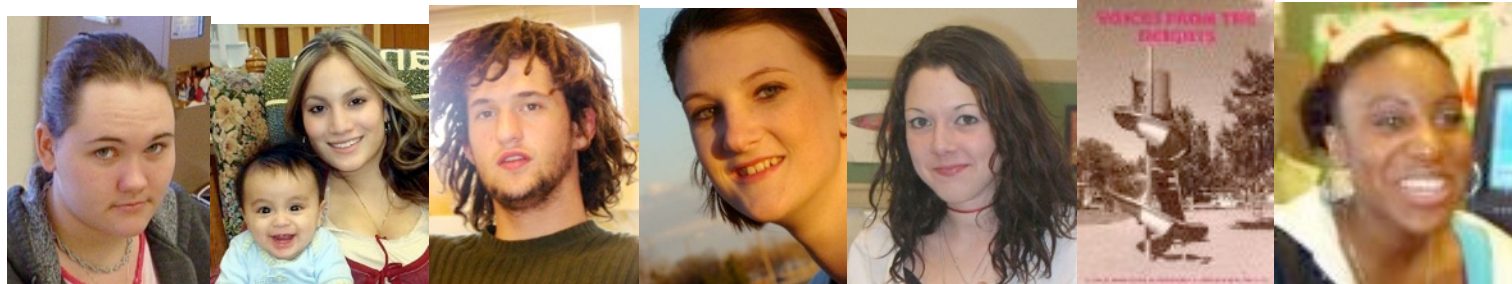
We've all been teenagers; we've all experienced the gamut of emotions, dreams, shattered dreams, redemption and hope. And we've survived.

"Voices From the Heights" can reconnect us to feelings we had as teenagers - from the safety of adulthood - open our eyes to what teenagers today are experiencing and maybe move some to help ease their transition into adulthood.

Meet some of the authors in "Voices From the Heights"

Graduation main goal of students at North Heights

By Bruce Beck



North Heights Alternative School. For many who've lived in Amarillo for a while, the phrase conjures up images of the dregs of the school district: kids returning from rehab, pregnant teens, troublemakers and other ne'er-do-wells. That image is only one part of what makes North Heights a unique campus within the Amarillo Independent School District. The other part is the Priority Achieve Success in School program.

"Ours is a school of choice: Our students are those who want to be in school," said Mark Williams, English teacher, and the 2007 Amarillo Independent School District Secondary Teacher of the Year. "For many, it's a last shot at success, but others are National Merit scholars and straight-A students and students who want to finish early and they all mix together - no cliques; one big happy family bent on one goal: graduation."

Williams, a published author, is one of the guiding lights behind "Voices From the Heights" - a collection of personal journeys, gritty tales, short stories, courageous confessions and beginnings of novels.

For four years, Williams, Abril Vazquez and Renee Shackelford assembled literary works from the students at North Heights, and 72 of them are included in "Voices From the Heights." As many as 20 authors and their supporters will be at Barnes & Noble Booksellers, 2415 S. Soncy Road, at 2 p.m. Saturday to sign copies of the book and talk about their experiences.

" 'Voices from the Heights' is representative of all that is right with today's youth," Williams said. The teenagers wrote about what matters to them: the opposite sex, social issues, sports, high school, politics, literature, history.

"They tackle subjects that teenagers talk about and think about," Williams said. "They muse about their futures, their hopes, their dreams and their sobering realities.

"The students wrote these stories unburdened by the need to receive in-class credit; they wrote because they had things to say."

One of the subjects many had to sound off about is their experiences at North Heights Alternative School and how they owe their lives to the caring teachers on staff.

"Mentors try to make it their job to motivate and convince students school is where they should be," wrote Grace Weber. "Instead of giving up on me and kicking me out, the teachers saw potential in me. People care. And now I care about me."

Stupid decisions led Noel Zebley down a hard path, he said. Enrolling at North Heights saved his life.

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Stupid decisions led Noel Zebley down a hard path, he said. Enrolling at North Heights saved his life.

"Never will I feel the love that I felt on my first day at North Heights," he said. "I just hope that everyone realizes there are people who would like to help you and there are people who want to see you succeed."

The teachers at North Heights treat each student with respect, said Jodi Scott.

"We are put in charge of our own learning," she wrote. "(The teachers) are simply here to get the best out of each of us."

Many of the authors in "Voices From the Heights" have graduated and moved on to the next phases in their lives. Others are preparing to graduate and look to the future with hope and confidence in themselves and their abilities. We will hear more from the "Voices From the Heights."

Octavia Chambers, a junior at North Heights Alternative School and her home campus, Tascosa High School, has already made a mark on Amarillo's writing scene. Her "The Black Illusion" was featured as a guest column on the op-ed page of the April 6 Sunday Amarillo Globe-News. She has dreams of one day becoming a political activist and working for the NAACP.

Janet Nabors interned with the Amarillo Independent before leaving for Florida. Now back in Amarillo, she attends Amarillo College with plans to move on to a four-year college in pursuit of a journalism degree.

Matthew Sangster begins classes in the fall at Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colo., on an academic scholarship in the fall, majoring in English and minoring in Outdoor Recreation. Matt has been asked to write for the campus newspaper. He has abandoned his first planned novel but is working on a new one. He wants one day to teach college English and write books and essays.

Krystyna Bean Lincoln is nearly finished with the first of her trilogy of novels, "The Crimson Forest," and is negotiating with Crossquarter Publishing Group. Now a resident of Pflugerville since graduating, she works as a substitute teacher while attending Austin Community College. She hopes to study at The University of Texas to become an English teacher.

Samantha Medina finished her first novel, "Rage of Darkness," a Gothic tale of horror, and has begun her second novel, "Crime of the Century," a murder-mystery. She is taking classes at Milan Institute of Cosmetology, has outlines for other novels and one day plans to become a writer and a hairdresser.

Cristal Gallegos received a full four-year scholarship to Texas A & M University beginning in the fall, where she will major in science with the long-term goal of becoming an orthodontist. She is ranked eighth in her graduating class at Tascosa High School.

Abril Vazquez, one of the editors of "Voices from the Heights," gave birth to her son, Daniel, at age 16, worked hard and will graduate this month, a year early. She has dreams of one day owning a nice but affordable house, of sending her son to a private school and becoming a medical assistant. She plans to attend Amarillo College in the fall.

Kristian Holland, the photographer for the front and back cover of "Voices From the Heights," plans to go to Amarillo College this fall, majoring in journalism and has a dream of becoming a photojournalist.

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No Break from Reading

April 3, 2012



Many Travis Middle School students didn't take a break from reading during the Spring Break holiday. In fact, the students logged more than 4,600 hours of reading during the week off! Wow, that's the mind boggling equivalent of 192 days of walk-to-work reading!

As part of this effort to promote reading, Travis took the opportunity to recognize the students who went above and beyond their peers. Students Brandy Blount and Kristin Slocum picked up top honors at the reading celebration, leading the school with the most logged hours. Travis students were challenged to read for at least ten hours and to finish three or more books during the week away from school. It looks like a lot of the students were up for the challenge.

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Home > The Fiend in the Void

North Heights student authors eBook

submitted by [Brenda Bernet](#) on Tue, 02/15/2011 - 3:18pm

The idea for Jesus Salcido's new novel grew from a writing project for his senior English class at North Heights Alternative School, his teacher Mark Williams said.

His novel "The Fiend in the Void" went on sale on Feb. 8 on Amazon. The eBook for the Amazon Kindle costs \$3.50.

Salcido's fictional work chronicles a futuristic society ravaged by a virus, according to a story summary. A vaccine cures millions, but a dangerous side effect turns the cured into drug addicts identified by black irises and rage. A detective takes the reader through the wasteland to find whether hope remains for humanity.

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North Heights books available on eBooks

Posted: February 9, 2012 - 3:18pm

By [JACOB MAYER](#)

Two of North Heights Alternative School's large student projects have moved online. The student-produced books "Voices of the Heights" and "Paintings on the Wall" are now available for download on eBooks. Each costs \$8.99 and is available for iPhone, iPad and iPod Touch.

North Heights Principal Mark Williams said one of the best parts of the project for students is the chance to share their experiences with more people than just their teacher.

"I'm connected with a teacher. Big deal," Williams

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Recent Activity

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Young author to sign memoir

Posted: Saturday, December 08, 2008

[Brenda Bernet](#)
[brenda.bernet@amarillo.com](#)

Kristian Holland used to hate writing, but a class at North Heights Alternative School changed that.

Holland, 18, will sign copies of "Voices from the Heights," a collection of student works, at 11 a.m. today at Barnes and Noble Booksellers. Her photos appear on the front and back covers.

The writings were collected over a four-year period from students in the Priority Achieve Success in School program. The program is for students at risk of not graduating from high school.

More than 1,000 copies of "Voices" have been purchased, some by people living as far away as New Jersey and Denmark.

Because of the continued interest of students at North Heights, a new book called "Paintings on the Walls" is in the works, said Mark Williams, an English teacher and editor of "Voices."

When Holland started taking classes at North Heights, Williams discovered she enjoyed photography. He selected Holland's photos for the book, which also features a story Holland titled "Perfect."

Holland said Williams inspired her to write. She began discussing her ideas and a story began to pour out.

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- Student project aids troops abroad
- Academic Spotlight: Marisa Montoya
- No place to go
- Poll: Craddock, Parker lead Railroad Commission races

Helping Hands: Coffee, cash and class

Students learn business 'cents' without exams

Posted: Sunday, November 30, 2008

[Kevin Welch](#)
[kevin.welch@amarillo.com](#)

Running a coffee shop is work, but students at North Heights Alternative School are paid only in knowledge.

Students and teachers started Papparazzi's last year, but recently declared the business open.

"Last year was a yearlong soft opening," said Mark D. Williams, a teacher who advises the students. "This year we wanted to fix what didn't work."

Customers from within the school can buy gourmet coffee, espresso, specialty coffee drinks, tea and hot chocolate at Papparazzi's location in one of the school's halls before classes begin in the morning, or place orders that are delivered to classrooms during the day.

The money keeps the business running and goes toward scholarships for North Heights students.

"This is essentially a yearlong fundraiser," Williams said.

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Teen authors' passion yields magazine

Posted: Tuesday, December 30, 2008

[Brenda Bernet](#)
[brenda.bernet@amarillo.com](#)

Students come and go at North Heights Alternative School, but a long-running fixture connects one class of students with the next.

"The Fringe" started with a student interested in a campus newspaper, but grew to a magazine of more than 30 pages that publishes every six to eight weeks, said Mark Williams, an English teacher for the Priority Achieve Success in School, or PASS, program at North Heights, in North Amarillo. The magazine has failed two book projects, given students the confidence to write and led others to become published authors.

Teenagers in the PASS program run the gamut from honors students to those who previously dropped out of school. They arrive with one mission, to earn a high school diploma. But many students leave with more than a diploma, and the magazine plays a part.

To view "The Fringe," click here

"The Fringe" has been described as the pulse of the PASS program," Williams said. "We don't do fuzzy pieces or cutesy interviews. The students tackle tough subjects, share honestly in their pieces. There's an edge to each Fringe. And it takes an army to make each issue come to life."

Carly Osborne, 17, a recent graduate, said few assignments appealed to her, but her interest piqued when Williams proposed that she serve as editor for an issue. She agreed, and the project took her two months, she said.

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November 16, 2011

It looks like we may have some future film...
Newsroom students work to prepare for...
Graduates' video contest. Our teams have...
to stay in school. The winners will receive...
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Students Honor Vet

Students win video awards

North Heights class overcomes lost work to win prizes

Posted: January 19, 2012 - 11:46pm

By [JACOB MAYER](#)
[jacob.mayer@amarillo.com](#)

Almost \$1,500 for two days of work sounds pretty good, right? Don't tell that to a group of video production students at North Heights Alternative School.

After nearly two months of work on public service announcements to encourage students to stay in school, the students lost all of their work just two days before the contest deadline.

"To walk into my class and tell them and see the looks on their faces, it was amazing," said Mark Williams, a North Heights English teacher who oversaw the project.

After digesting the bad news, the students got to work and quickly produced videos that won a combined \$1,450 in a student video contest hosted by KACV-TV, Amarillo Independent School District and Panhandle Twenty/20, Williams said.

The video projects were the last phase of a \$20,000 American Graduate Community

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RECENT ACTIVITY

Young author to sign memoir

Posted: Saturday, December 08, 2008

[Brenda Bernet](#)
[brenda.bernet@amarillo.com](#)

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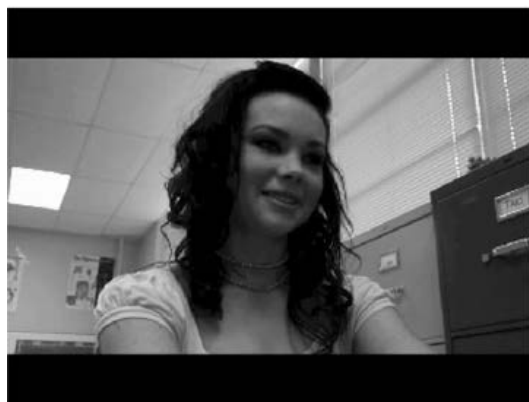
We form tribes. Around the app, the newswire, the Fringe, Thank the Soldiers --- etc. I can't tell you how many students over the last seven years talk about how NHAS PASS feels like a family.

Differentiation – choice individual curriculum for EACH of my students – yes, I create a syllabus, a learning path that differs from student to student. They have a say-so, it's a true partnership. I was engaged when I was in high school by literary criticism, Civil War military strategy, baseball statistics, girls, muscle cars and jazz music. They didn't teach all of those things but I was engaged when they did. I was bored otherwise. No teacher EVER asked me what engaged me. No teacher EVER really had a meaningful conversation with me. That was the way of education back then. I hated some classes so I learned strategies to beat the system, trick the teacher, make her/him like me, learn it all right before the test and forget it all right after. And I was a very good student – imagine what goes through the minds of those who struggle with school. Why can't education be more than it was when we all went to school? Why can't it be new and fresh, fun and relevant, meaningful and empowering? I've tried it for seven years and it works. It works very very well.



STUDENT-DRIVEN PROJECTS

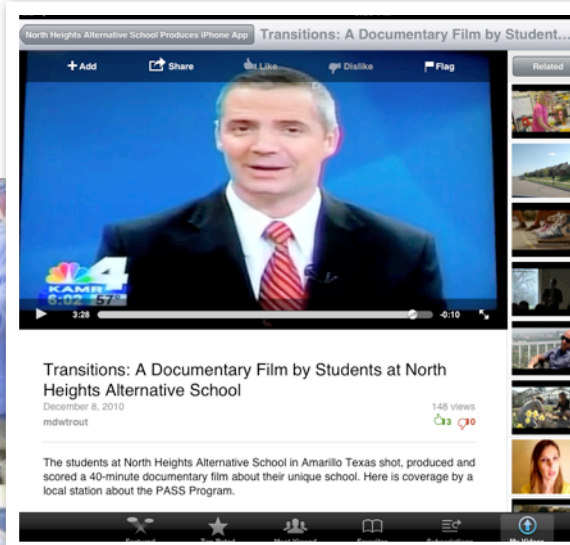
- The Fringe
- Brain Brawl
- Family Reading Night
- Using Indiegogo, Kickstarter
- YouTube Channel
- iPad Pilot Program
- Paparazzi Coffee House: a Student Run Business (2007-present)
- The Fringe (an award-winning full-color student-written and student-edited glossy magazine; 2007-present)
- KACV American Graduate Video Contest (multiple winners)
- Stop Film Fest 2011 and 2012 Award winning videos (8 total including best of show twice)
- 4ever4Everyone Public
- Service Announcement Commercials (5) and campaign that won best in state.
- Created Student-centered scholarship fund
- One to One Mac and iPad Pilot Program for the district
- 21st Century Seminar
- Orientation Video
- Transitions Documentary
- Voices Documentary
- PSAs for television
- Several books by student authors including booksignings, articles, etc.
- Collaboration on service projects with Eveline Rivers, Happy State Bank, McDonald's and The Big Texan.
- Collaboration with several elementary schools.
- Crowd-sourced book & film
- Collaboration w/WTAMU



Award-winning Public Service Announcement for Digital Citizenship and Safety

Students show off North Heights

Posted: December 10, 2010 - 1:35am



Stephen Spillman / Amarillo Globe-News

Tanner Love, 17, left, and Tim Hernandez, 19, shoot a photo for a student produced film titled Transitions in Mark Williams class at North Heights Alternative School.

- [Video: "Transitions: A Look at North Heights"](#)

By [BRENDA BERNET](#)

Amanda Purcell, 17, worried about fights when she first signed up for classes at the alternative school. Instead, she found a school she describes as "amazing" with teachers who cared about her and students she got along with.

"It was like, 'Welcome to the family. Take a seat. Let me figure out who you are,'" Purcell said.

Her experience sent her on a mission to change the perception about students at North Heights Alternative School, 607 N. Hughes St. It's true pregnant students attend North Heights, and students are sent there when they get in trouble. But there's also the Priority Achieve Success in School, or PASS program, designed for students who have failed classes and need to catch up, for students intent on graduating early and those who don't fit in at a traditional school.

"We want to show this school off," said Purcell, who applied for the PASS program to graduate from high school early and pursue a career as a nurse anesthetist. As part of an English class, she joined with fellow director Hayley Traves, 17, to produce a 40-minute documentary on the alternative school to rebuff stereotypes of the students who attend. They worked with student editors Michael Grady, 17, and Eric Wiley, 19, and a core group of about 20 others.

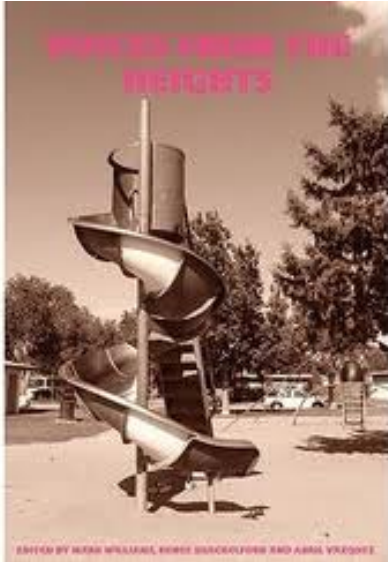
In the documentary, the narrator explains that students consider North Heights a school of opportunity and privilege. Students interviewed explain the care that teachers give to students. Wiley applied to North Heights after falling behind his peers at Tascosa High School. A counselor suggested the PASS program might help him. He's almost finished.

"I could not learn with 30 kids to the classroom," Wiley said. "It was so hard for me to pay attention."

When he came to North Heights, Wiley said he felt like he had control over his education. Teachers tailored his education to his personal goals. Wiley originally wanted to work in auto mechanics, but through classes at North Heights he has discovered a knack for public speaking.

"It's a better environment for us to learn," he said. "It gives us more motivation." North Heights Principal Mark Leach estimated the school serves 600 students, with more than half enrolled in the general educational development diploma program.

"For kids who want to focus on graduating and receiving instruction in a smaller, comfortable environment, this is perfect for them," Leach high school students. At North Heights classes are limited to about 12 students, a key component of the PASS program. Teachers and students have flexibility in how they fulfill graduation requirements, though they are under the same standards as all other high school students.



Voices: A Documentary

2007

Voices: A Documentary was the first documentary my students made. The equipment was antiquated, the sound less than desirable, but the spirit and determination palpable. 53 minutes long but it will last a lifetime in your memory.

Alternative Education / Creating Non-Traditional Pathways For Success

Let me tell you a bit about the PASS Program at NHAS. The common perception is that we're a school of misfits. Our program is not for so-called bad kids. Ours is a school of choice. We have to accept you. Our students are those who want to be in school. For many, it's a last shot at success. Our students are pregnant, out of rehab, past troublemakers and ne-er do wells. But our students are also National Merit scholars and straight A students and students who want to finish early and they all mix together, no cliques, one big happy family bent on one goal: graduation. But they are not bad kids.

All are at risk. But aren't all teens at risk? And within a day or two of orientation, new students, no matter their past or present, blend in with everyone else. Each student comes into each class, knows their work, gets after it and it's all done with an inspired staff of veteran creative teachers and flexible alternative inter-curricular lessons; we have learned that teenagers (who are all at risk remember) need to build relationships with us, with other students.

That's the beauty of our student-run projects like *The Fringe*, *Paparazzi*, *Newswire* and the other hundred other projects.

I am lucky to have taught Freshman English (Rhetoric and Composition) at Texas A & M University. We taught process writing that is similar in nature to New Jersey Writing, the process writing program that AISD sanctions. I was lucky to have been a student at McMurry when the developer of New Jersey Writing was teaching English (Joyce Ann Carroll.) I am lucky to have taught 'Creative Writing' and 'Getting Your Writing Published' classes at North Central Texas College. I am lucky to have given seminars and lectures to professional writing organizations on writing and publishing.

I am lucky to have been a professional writer for the last 25 years, having published twenty books and hundreds of magazine and newspaper articles. I am lucky because these experiences provide me with a writer's background, a broad perspective, creative spirit and familiarity with rejection. My writing background provides me some leverage to gain their attention when it comes to asking them be writers, to be better students. You have them look online at Amazon.com or Barnesnoble.com and they see your books and it's an easy sell. You use what works.

We challenge our students and they surpass our expectations. It's a group thing at North Heights. We work together and our staff and our curriculum, our understanding of at-risk students, our principal, all come together to make the PASS Program something special. The students are at different stages in every class. I teach 9-12 English so of twelve or fifteen students in the room, all are working on different parts of different semesters. They all have different needs to find their depth of knowledge within the subject but they also have different needs in their evolution as an adult. We have to provide them the ability to be successful in all phases after graduation.

We do many special things in PASS and in my room, special because of the symbiosis between the teachers and the students (and the students with other students.) Special because of the trust we have in each other, in this learning partnership we have enjoined. I look around the room and I have five students writing books, two with books already completed, and two more who have book proposals with my literary agent and with publishers. But not every student has the call to write books.

I am super excited that we have an underground current to read. Our students are learning to love books. They read constantly, talk about the books, share the books, ask me for ideas for new books, ask me to share ideas about the concepts in the books. Exciting teaching opportunities. You can find books for all potential readers, trust me and when you do, it's magic.

I considered telling you in detail about one of the two documentary films we as a school have filmed and edited, *Voices* (2007) and *Transitions* (2010). Forty minutes of footage showing behind the scenes pride of what has been voted the best alternative school in Texas. The kids are amazing, shooting with my professional-level videocameras and SLR digital cameras, learning the iMovie and Final Cut Pro software, initiating and completing scintillating concepts for the movie including taped interviews with students and teachers, eyecrossing graphic arts and more. The movie will be shown at various times and various places in the future so I'll let the movie speak for itself at that time but *Transitions* drew 255 people at a showing at Amarillo College one rainy Saturday evening. Brain Brawl was another consideration, a continuation of Academic Bowl I ran at Travis but honestly, *the Fringe, the Fringe*; it's what makes our classes tick.

I'm most proud of *the Fringe*. This publication began as a newspaper, something I loved doing at Travis for three years. The Fringe became something else along the way. It's a full color magazine by the students for the students. The Fringe has been described as the pulse of the PASS Program. The Fringe is a 32-page news-magazine or maybe it's a magazine, it's hard to describe. Full color glossy 8 1/2 x 11 complete with student-written articles and stories and editorials and art and reviews and photos and political cartoons and so on. This is not your father's school newspaper. Soon, the students told me the other day, it will no longer be printed but only be available as an iBook Magazine to read on their iPads. We don't do fuzzy pieces or cutesy interviews. The students tackle tough subjects, share honestly in their pieces. There's an edge to each Fringe. And it takes an army to make each issue come to life. Not all the students are in my class, not all take English.

Some students have excellent editing skills. Some are natural writers. But most of my kids don't think of themselves as writers or editors or have any dreams of participating in a publication. Until they see their first copy of the Fringe. "We get to do this?" they always ask. "Wow." Tell me you can't teach those eager students.



So you entice them, encourage them to write. You locate their drives and passions and direct them to write about those things. You hear them talking about something and you jump on it. Through building relationships, you learn what each student is all about and you learn that each one has a voice, has something to say. If they won't write, they often will have a need to express --- so they can take photographs, learn the software, take surveys. It's a bandwagon thing and of the two hundred students we have at any one time in the year, fifty to one-hundred are involved in making any one issue get published.

The Fringe is an equal opportunity employer; we allow anyone and everyone to contribute. We have 2-3 editors at one time and since our students come and go every 2-4 months, we have a neat turnover, fresh voices, an organic magazine. If you find something a student does or likes to do, they will write. We don't let them worry about judgment or mistakes --- we have editors and they've been taught that writing is a process and we'll make it sing and we do. The production is fun and exciting and rewarding. 50+ kids participate directly and will see their work --- another 20 do behind the scenes stuff and then the articles aren't your typical articles at all -- this is by the students and for the students after all. Mr. Leach and I shape their ideas, encourage, challenge them, push them past their limits ('wow me' is my credo) and we brag about them, analyze, how could you do it better?

The Fringe breeds writers --- the day it comes out (it costs \$2.40 cents for each single issue and we order up 120 of them and sometimes, if we haven't the money in the fund, I'll spring for it, but it's the most worthwhile money I ever spend --- it's free for the kids) finds the students antsy and itchy, ready to read. Go to any classroom and you'll see active reading and soon, active discussion. Learning. Interaction. Critical thinking. When the students begin talking with teachers, that's when the modeling and building relationships begins and that's what it's all about. A few minutes after they get the issues, we have a new batch of writers and contributors. What a blast. All students need help interacting, learning to act like adults, learning to give and take and within the construction of each issue, these students deal with these elements.

The Fringe is a social event. Kids ask about it all the time and this is an invitation to get them to write or contribute or to be noticed (and that's half the battle.) They wear their contributions to the Fringe like a badge of honor. I am imagining certain students as I write this and I am beaming with pride. Big ol' Craig wrote a full article and it was funny and made sense? Little Jenny wrote an op-ed piece and it was dead on and nobody ever saw it coming. I am so proud of all these students. *The Fringe* is a measuring stick and unlike some of their other PASS program accomplishments, this one is so public, so out there, that for them to risk their vulnerability but accomplish so much makes it even more worthwhile.

Some might start with graphics and Pages (now it's iBooksAuthor) or just being a reader of someone else's article and before long, they're hooked, they want to be a part of it and since we don't have cliques and segregation we just have family, they feel comfortable and safe enough to jump in. We had this student who came from an impoverished background, had to take care of her two invalid parents and a special needs handicapped sister. She was a dropout who came back to finish at age 20 and on the day she graduated, a crying proud day, she gave fifty bucks to *the Fringe* to keep it running. We knew she couldn't afford this act of generosity but over her tears, she insisted. "You gave me a chance to be a part of something; you gave me a chance to get my views out in the public eye and I think it's important that my legacy is that I help others after me have the same opportunity." There wasn't a dry eye in the room even the tough kid who was a grind-it-out fullback. And we all knew what she meant.

The Aha moments are priceless, teaching opportunities endless. Not one single part of this is easy for them (learning how to use a \$1200 camera, writing for publication -- hey, that's tough, learning the everchanging publishing software, learning how to download 12 megapixel pics from the camera, how to create new folders on the computer and on and on.) Keeping *the Fringe* going requires a lot of attention and multitasking and energy and I am those things and love it --- to take my ADD and hyperactivity and this curse of energy and loving kids and making it work for all of us, well, I can't imagine not doing this. *The Fringe* led to the students writing and publishing five books that the world can buy through Amazon, Barnes and Noble and iTunes. *The Fringe* led to the crowdsourced book between five schools that will come out this fall.

At risk students have special needs --- like all teens, especially those who have slipped through the cracks --- you must get their attention, respect, build relationships, create trust, make the lessons relevant and make connections. *The Fringe* allows me to do all those things. I am proud of my kids and what's better is that they are proud of themselves. The students informed this week that the Fringe will no longer be in print, that it will now be available only through iBooks and iTunes sent to each student's iPad because (they had several reasons including carbon footprints, technology dictates this, the future is now) the students drive this program, their learning, and my involvement.



*Award-winning concept video
produced by several students,
shown as a commercial on
television.*

High Stakes Achievement Outcomes: College and Career Readiness

Prepare the students for success after graduation? We are trying but so are the kids. The Scaffolding For Success video is below. This seminar the result of a dialogue we had in my class --- -50 students did it, videoed it,

We encourage and teach soft-people skills (such as the Paparazzi Coffeeshop)– presenting business plans to banks, writing business plans for their dreams, academic language, college tours as a class, bringing in professors and experts from the fields they want to learn about, writing writers and authors, publishing in magazines--- we look for high impact, high yield strategies. Some call it achievement but that typically only measures the end result. We measure by the learning journey, those skills learned during the process. We want publication, resolution of course and we have rubrics to measure achievement to be sure. Achievement shouldn't be judged by our generation's narrow view but by how much the student learns, how the student interacts and collaborates and succeeds, how the student responds to failure, how the student responds to success and how the student creates. We provide blended learning; we provide technology, direct instruction, freedom of choice, responsibility and empowerment. They are engaged by this approach and because of this approach-engagement, they will be better prepared for life after high school.

Raising the bar, raising expectations doesn't have to just mean that we make tests harder, make lessons more complex, make them read more or make their research paper longer. As a matter of fact, we don't have tests or research papers or typical lessons. If you want the students to go beyond what they believe they can do, go beyond what they have done in the past, you have to break the cycle, break the rules and create a partnership where it's okay to fail, encouraged to try, expected to succeed. We have to model and inform, advice and direct.



Scaffolding for Success

Several dozen North Heights students created the Scaffolding for Success Seminar. They did so because they thought our school was not properly preparing them for the real world. They wanted to know how to interview, how to apply for a loan, etc. So we told them to do it. The team did it all -- planning, inviting local community and business leaders, scheduling a rotating set of speakers and presenters, taking care of food, and it came off great.

Students learn business 'cents' without exams

Posted: Sunday, November 30, 2008

Kevin Welch

kevin.welch@amarillo.com

Running a coffee shop is work, but students at North Heights Alternative School are paid only in knowledge.



Students and teachers started Paparazzi's last year, but recently declared the business open.

"Last year was a yearlong soft opening," said Mark D. Williams, a teacher who advises the students. "This year we wanted to fix what didn't work."

Customers from within the school can buy gourmet coffee, espresso, specialty coffee drinks, tea and hot chocolate at Paparazzi's location in one of the school's halls before classes begin in the morning, or place orders that are delivered to classrooms during the day.

The money keeps the business running and goes toward scholarships for North Heights students.

"This is essentially a yearlong fundraiser," Williams said.

The "profit" is the lessons learned. From writing a business plan to making sure there is espresso when a customer wants it, the approximately 10 students involved are finding out how to be good employees and how a business is run.

A statement of purpose lays out the program's goals.

"We want Paparazzi's to show our students relevancy; how to run a business, how to work in a business, ethics, hard work, the business owner's point of view, empathy for the business," it says.

Chris "Tuna" Saucedo, the 17-year-old manager of the business, previously worked at a Subway sandwich shop and Cowboy Church. The experience is teaching him lessons that also earn him credit in classes for his efforts in areas like economics, marketing and business communication.

"This is real different. It's mental. You have responsibility, and have to figure out what happens next," he said. "It's also made me mature a lot. I used to be the class clown - acting up."

Shanice Griego, 17, is an assistant manager who previously worked at a Pizza Hut.

"There, you get a paycheck. Here, you get credit for graduation," she said.

She keeps track of inventory to coordinate restocking and helped design some of the training and testing for new employees.

Besides financial management, there's the coffee control, and Hanna Rodgers, another 17-year-old assistant manager, describes herself as "the coffee fanatic."

"I know how all the drinks should taste," she said. "When we go to Starbucks, I'm the person that has the really complicated order."

She oversees duties like training, cleanup and setup, and figures the experience will be good for her. But that's not why she does it.

"I love it," she said. "I can make someone else's day brighter."



Alternative Education and What It Looks Like Now – You'll Be Surprised

North Heights Alternative School is a school of choice, a state mentor school, recognized as one of the top alternative schools in Texas. The NHAS' student body made up entirely of at-risk students who are not succeeding in one of the four main traditional high schools in Amarillo. The staff has presented numerous times to local, regional and state educators, schools and organizations showing off the great things that happen at North Heights. We have been a Mentor school for Texas Association of Alternative Schools several times.

NHAS saves students. Of the 400 to 500 students who enroll at North Heights each year, most are in danger of dropping out of school. NHAS is their last chance. We graduate approximately 100 full time students and assist with 300 to 400 part time students throughout the year. Overall, students complete over 1200-2200 courses each year and our enrollment continues to grow. We graduated 97 students my first year. This past year, we graduated 203 students. We've doubled the number of full-time students in seven years and we have a waiting list now. What's happened? The other four high schools that feed us their students, their so-called problem students, those who would probably drop out, those who are seniors who just a year removed were in refugee camps in Burma or Somalia, are having amazing success at our school so we get more and more of them. Send them. We're ready.



Statistical Outcomes, TEKS Focus, Standards Based Achievement Outcomes

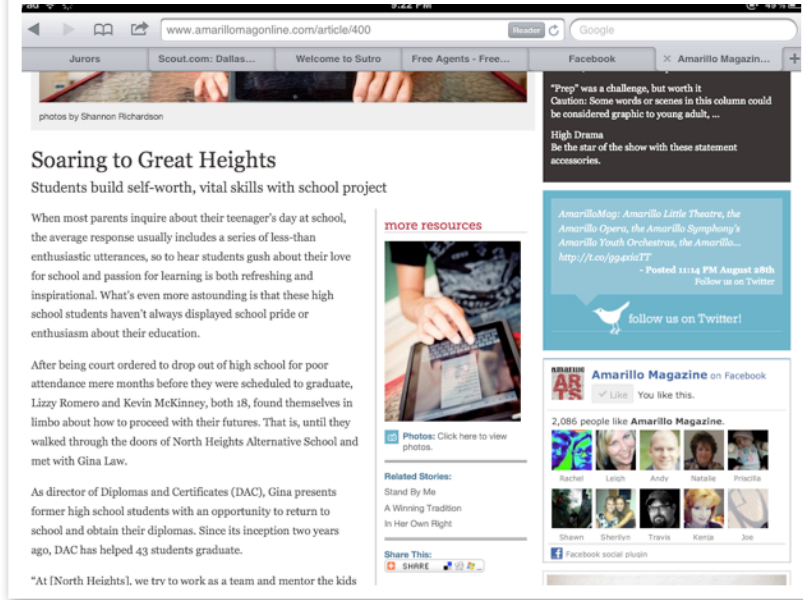


Texas Education Agency releases AEIS data each year on every school in the state of Texas. AEIS data reflects student success on our state assessment (TAKS) in the four core areas and the high school completion rate by student cohort. This accountability is our report card to the community and reflects our success in preparing students for success beyond high school. North Heights excels in both criteria:

- In 2007-2008, the Amarillo Independent School District percentage (four high schools) for at-risk students (some 28,156) passing the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) was 82% (23,200 passed).
- In 2007-2008, North Heights' percentage for at-risk students passing the TAKS was 100%. The ethnic breakdown: African American 11%, Hispanic 34%, White 47%.
- In 2006-2007, North Heights percentage for at-risk students passing the TAKS was 97%.
- The North Heights' completion rate for the class of 2007, for 100% at-risk students, was an amazingly high 95% compared to 85.4% for AISD high schools.
- North Heights students passed at 100% English TAKS tests this past year, 2012, and in fact, the full-time rate for English from 2008-2012 TAKs is 100%. 2007 was 97%.

What is North Heights doing that takes economically-disadvantaged, at-risk students who are at great risk of dropping out and turns them into students who complete their education? We haven't rebuilt the wheel but we have developed a philosophy and subsequent (and ever-changing, malleable) strategies that when combined, create a unique and efficient learning culture. Our program is not just a collection of best practices but a cohesive game plan on how to implement our program for a new or existing alternative school. We also believe that many elements of what we do can be applied to traditional schools.

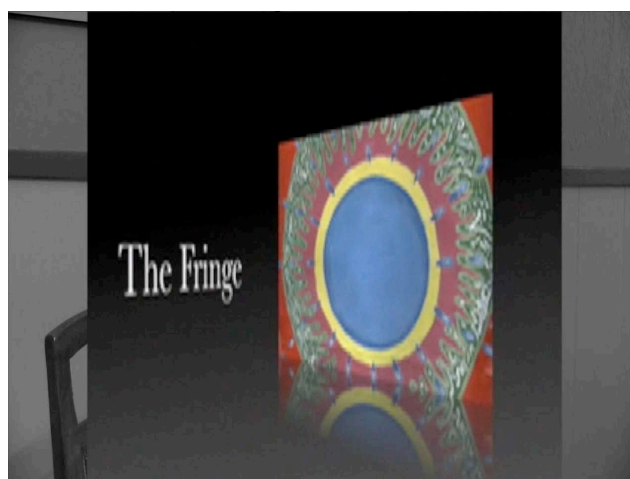




Common Core and So Much More, Authentic Learning Experiences

We form tribes. Around the app, the newswire, the Fringe, Thank the Soldiers --- etc. I can't tell you how many students over the last seven years talk about how NHAS PASS feels like a family. Differentiation – choice individual curriculum for EACH of my students – yes, I create a syllabus, a learning path that differs from student to student. They have a say-so, it's a true partnership. I was engaged when I was in high school by literary criticism, Civil War military strategy, baseball statistics, girls, muscle cars and jazz music. They didn't teach all of those things but I was engaged when they did. I was bored otherwise. No teacher EVER asked me what engaged me. No teacher EVER really had a meaningful conversation with me. I wanted to create. That was the way of education back then. I hated some classes so I learned strategies to beat the system, trick the teacher, make her/him like me, learn it all right before the test and forget it all right after. And I was a very good student – imagine what goes through the minds of those who struggle with school. Why can't education be more than it was when we all went to school? Why can't it be new and fresh, fun and relevant, meaningful and empowering? I've tried it for seven years and it works. It works very very well.

*Amy Williams
talking in this
video about
how creativity
is the key to
making this
work.*





The video to the left show Kevin and Lizzy talking about how they started the iTunes app.



From Amarillo Magazine

Soaring to Great Heights

Students build self-worth, vital skills with school project

When most parents inquire about their teenager’s day at school, the average response usually includes a series of less-than enthusiastic utterances, so to hear students gush about their love for school and passion for learning is both refreshing and inspirational. What’s even more astounding is that these high school students haven’t always displayed school pride or enthusiasm about their education.

After being court ordered to drop out of high school for poor attendance mere months before they were scheduled to graduate, Lizzy Romero and Kevin McKinney, both 18, found themselves in limbo about how to proceed with their futures. That is, until they walked through the doors of North Heights Alternative School and met with Gina Law.

As director of Diplomas and Certificates (DAC), Gina presents former high school students with an opportunity to return to school and obtain their diplomas. Since its inception two years ago, DAC has helped 43 students graduate.

“At [North Heights], we try to work as a team and mentor the kids and keep them on track,” Gina explains. “That’s a key thing for most of the kids here. Sometimes it’s not just about doing that work, but calling them and keeping them on track and looking forward to the future, not necessarily looking back to things we didn’t do the first time. That’s how we work as team to keep all the kids going.”

Arriving at North Heights in March, Lizzy and Kevin were determined to toss their graduation caps in the air on time. Since they both lacked English credits, Gina enrolled the pair in Mark William’s English class. It was in this particular classroom that Lizzy and Kevin signed up for Amarillo 365, a smartphone app development project. Working on the app fostered an eagerness for learning and diligence they didn’t know they possessed.

“I miss this room,” Kevin sighs as he stares at the photos of smiling students and colorful artwork plastered on the walls.

To miss school, especially a classroom, is not a feeling Kevin acknowledged before enrolling at North Heights. During his last year at Caprock High School, Kevin had not attended class in three months, he says. Lizzy, a fellow Caprock classmate, had not intended to complete her schooling after she was forced to leave.

“I didn’t even plan on finishing high school,” Lizzy admits with unabashed honesty. “I got into a lot of trouble my senior year and ended up getting kicked out of school. After that happened I thought basically my life was over. I was so mad at myself... and then I got real depressed.”

With the encouragement of her mother, Lizzy scheduled an appointment to meet with Gina to discuss her options. Soon after she enrolled at North Heights, Lizzy took on the role of assistant spring director of Mr. William’s class project, a smartphone app/travel guide devoted to Amarillo. The venture required students to research and collect information on the city’s attractions, food and lodging by interviewing and collaborating with local businesses. The students were in charge of designing and marketing the app, as well. In September, the class will release the finished product to Sutro Media, a travel guide company specializing in the production of apps, to finalize coding and retail and have it out before Christmas, Mark says. One dollar from every app purchased will go toward a college scholarship for a North Heights’ student.

Already the author of 15 books as well as a fly fishing app, Mark decided developing an app as a class undertaking would present his students with a modern and exciting avenue to research and network as they would in the real world, and Lizzy and Kevin seemed like the ideal candidates to headline his venture.

“Lizzy and Kevin had been through a non-traditional route and by that I mean they had not found themselves in an academic setting before. They hadn’t been put in positions of leadership, responsibility and so on, but I saw that spark in them,” Mark recalls with a tone of pride. “They’ve got something. I saw this leadership and incrementally they earned it. And after a while they realized they could do it and were even giving me ideas.”

For the first time in her high school career, Lizzy became interested in school work, consumed with Amarillo 365, and wishing she could spend her whole day in Mr. William’s classroom. Unlike Lizzy, Kevin was not initially keen on contributing to the project. However, Lizzy’s undeniable zeal for it convinced him to join. With Kevin on board and with the departure of the spring director, Lizzy was promoted to spring director and Kevin became assistant spring director, forming the ideal team.

“Lizzy and Kevin had certain attributes that I thought worked well with [the project],” Mark says. “Lizzy is a non-stop worker and Kevin is an idea guy. And they’re friends. It just made sense to pair them up because they had such chemistry and they each kind of drove each other. They kind of toyed with each other and they would challenge each other.”

Lizzy attributes much of Amarillo 365’s success to Kevin. “Once Kevin came in, it helped me out a lot,” she humbly declares. “He’s the type of person that can talk to people. It’s really easy for him. With me, I get shy and nervous. And he’ll just be there talking and talking.”

“You guys were a good team because you had that first initial interest and dedication to the project,” Gina reassures as she turns toward Lizzy. “And Kevin had that enthusiasm.”

What began as a class project has transformed into much more for the Amarillo 365 team. As the first high school students in the nation to create a professional app sold through the iTunes store, Lizzy and Kevin have a vested interest in this assignment and have gained support from area businesses and organizations. Big Texan Steak Ranch co-owner, Bobby Lee, says he saw the value of the product and will advertise Amarillo 365 on the restaurant’s placemats and infamous “Free 72 oz. Steak” billboards seen on I-40. He also offered Kevin a summer internship working at the Big Texan.



“It was the enthusiasm of the kids and their teacher that impressed me,” Bobby says, “and the fact that they actually have the nerve to delve into the t-word: tourism.”

Lizzy and Kevin were quickly exposed to the business world when they met with Bobby Lee. Lizzy confesses she was quite shaky but walked away feeling confident. The two also sought advice from Eric Miller of the Amarillo Chamber of Commerce, who will allow them to use the Chamber of Commerce logo and images for the app.

“They were very sharp young people,” Eric says of his meeting with Lizzy and Kevin. “I was very impressed with all the background work they had done... I’m looking forward to being re-contacted and working with them in the fall.” With Eric’s help, the Amarillo 365 team attended National Tourism Day at the Texas Convention Center and connected with the community’s businesspeople.

“All of them [at the convention] wanted to talk to me and Kevin,” Lizzy recalls with surprise. “Sooner or later, they were all coming up and asking us what they could do and how they could be a part of it. It was really cool because instead of us wanting them, they actually wanted us.” In addition to graduating from high school, Lizzy and Kevin plan to attend Amarillo College in the fall. They were awarded \$1,000 scholarships from North Heights. Provided by Gwen and Don Maroney, the self-sustaining scholarships will help Lizzy become a nurse and assist Kevin in his pursuit of a music degree.

“We have high expectations for these kids,” Mark says of North Heights students. “These are kids who aren’t going to be your straight-A students, who haven’t typically had a lot of success in school. When you give them a chance to lead and a chance to fail and recognize that failure and realize it’s OK to fail, they do amazing things. I’m a total believer in this generation. It’s just that we don’t understand them. However, it’s not just about earning those pieces of paper for Lizzy and Kevin. They’ve built self-esteem and discovered what they’re capable of achieving in and out of the classroom. “I’m so proud of Kevin and Lizzy,” Mark exclaims. “They’ve exceeded everybody else’s expectations, but more importantly, they’ve exceeded their own expectations.” Lizzy credits her mentors at North Heights and the skills she acquired working on Amarillo 365 with her growth, both mentally and physically.

“[North Heights] gave me a lot of hope,” Lizzy states with gratitude, “especially Ms. Law and Mr. Williams. Not only are they teachers, but they inspired me to do a lot with my life. Just because I messed up in the past doesn’t mean I can’t make something out of myself in the future. I should have learned that a long time ago, but I didn’t learn it until now. But I’m glad I learned it because it changed me as a person and I grew up a lot over here. Even just the little time I was here I learned a lot about myself and the world out there.”

Lizzy and Kevin would even work on the app at home, anxiously awaiting their arrival at school the next day to show Mr. Williams their findings. **“Here, we couldn’t wait to go to school. It was the whole atmosphere, it just made you want to be here,” Lizzy says. “It was like a new adventure every day,” Kevin adds.** Now, more and more teenagers want to become a part of that adventure, thanks to the success of Lizzy and Kevin. Gina has already had requests from teenagers to enroll at North Heights and become a part of Amarillo 365’s development, which will continue into the fall.

“We actually encourage a lot of friends to come back to school,” Lizzy says. “Not just our friends but our classmates from our senior year who were dropping out or getting kicked out.” Even though Lizzy and Kevin graduated in May, they will still visit the place that believed in them and the mentors that pushed them to strive. “It’s crazy. I got kicked out of school and graduated,” Kevin shouts. “Come on. The two plan on visiting North Heights this month to advise Mr. Williams’s new students on the ins and outs of the app. “I know I’m going to be coming back to North Heights,” Kevin proclaims as he nods his head with certainty. “When we were here, people who graduated years ago would still come in and show their love to North Heights. And that’s what we’re going to do.”

by Drew Belle Zerby

Technology changes exponentially – one author said ten years is a century now -- this is their language

So I walked right into a great situation:

A ready-made laboratory with a great staff.

The culture was already established.

So here in PASS, I was able to become the teacher I always wanted to be.

I believe that The future belongs to a new breed —our students will need to be creators and empathizers, pattern recognizers, and meaning makers.

That meant that I have to be emotionally astute and creatively aware. I have to listen to them, really listen, observe , interact in meaningful ways, keep them from getting bored. I know what many think about his generation --- it's the same that all generations think about the generations that follow. They're lazy, they feel entitled, they don't know as much. I know my grandfather felt that way about my father and I know for a fact my father felt that way about me and my generation.

But they were wrong. This generation is amazing it's just that few understand them. They learn quickly but they want information to be relevant and meaningful to them. They sort through amazing amounts of information every day so they learn to sniff out those things that don't affect them. This information overload makes them bored easily. They learn in clumps, gestalt style.

You don't speak their language if you're over thirty. They speak technology and social media. Technology is their native language and they learn it so swiftly, it is as though it's a different language all together. But this generation is capable and ready.

Like AISD believes – we believe and incorporate **21st Century Skills** – creativity, collaboration, adaptability, communication Soft people skills. I have created this culture in my room, in our halls. I like to think my job is to be a director for their own learning, for their projects and for their future. I wake up every day excited to go to work. I wake every day determined not to disappoint my students, my colleagues. I wake every day determined to enrich their learning process. And mine. They teach me too.



Student Designed, Student Driven, Student Success

25:55 Video Clip

I don't do all the work. They do.

I'm smart enough and prepared enough to work with them, direct them, guide them, advise them and patient enough to let them fail and struggle just enough. I'm proud that in English dept, we have 100% TAKS the last four years for our fulltime students

We don't talk TAKS very much.

In English, we want to dream big – we're in the dream big business, preparation for real life; we want to push previous boundaries. It's easy with at-risk kids, students who have not done well at traditional schools to get them to try something different from what they've done for 11 years.

When my kids first come in my class, I interview them --- at the end of our talk, I ask them to write a page or two about their hobbies, goals, passions and dreams. It's a trick twofold –

I want to see how they write and think but also I want them to start thinking about goals and passions and dreams. Many don't. It's hard to believe – so we have to start somewhere.

What ELSE DO I Do? What else can I do?

I get a new student and ask ---- How can I help meet their needs not how can they meet my rules.

I use Lots of technology but it's only good if it does three things:

- 1) makes whatever you want to do, easier
- 2) improve efficiency
- 3) allow us to create something new, different

I practice the 1000 yard stare just like we're supposed to do on when driving. It, whatever IT is, doesn't have to be done today. Remember that the skills they are learning today, will join others you teach them along the way. Where they end up is more important than any discipline problem or inattention today.

One trick is to make them not want to disappoint me. Each other. Themselves. This comes from Relationships and Relevance. The rigor is built in.

I have to allow them to learn.

I have to make them become Teachers.

Patience and Trust --- really let it be self-paced, really let them lead, let them fail and struggle and succeed. Do we teachers really ALLOW them to lead a project? Do we suffocate them with rules? I think it is imperative to allow them to try, to fail, to succeed without us getting in their way and doing it for them.

Here's my own personal example ---

I had a type A Father, a successful engineer and contractor. With a builder like Dad, growing up and not being a builder was tough. I hesitated to tell Dad when I had a school project. His eyes would light up and he'd start scribbling plans on a napkin. I always had the best volcano in the science fair and the fastest Soap Box Derby car. For my sister Tammy, his working version of a Panama Canal Lock won first prize.

I was asked to give Dad's eulogy seven years ago at Second Baptist Church in Houston. One-thousand crying folks in the crowd. Here is part of what I told them --

I was 12 and We were at our family farm adding on a bathroom to the 1870s homestead. Dad was hammering nails and I was the go-getter. We were building a bathroom on to the farmhouse, real indoor plumbing, and the outhouse we had used for so many years would become a half-moon relic. I could hear Uncle Marcus at the saw, the whining of the blades tearing through a 2 by 4.

Dad could usually hammer the nail down in two or three swings, dead center. Not this time. He smashed his thumb with a vicious hit and yanked his thumb to his mouth. When he pulled it out and showed me, I shrunk back at the sight. The thumbnail had been split, blood was pouring out and the purple thumb throbbed so loudly, I could feel the pain

It was at this point in my life when I realized just what a trusting man my father was, how much faith this man could have -----

He handed me the hammer, reached across into my nail bag, held a 16-penny nail to the board and said to this twelve-year old boy who loved books more than tools, "Here. You hammer this in while I hold it." Dad had never taught me to hammer. He was the kind who would watch me struggle to hit the nail and would yank the hammer back from me and "show" me how it's done.

Those fifteen swings constituted the longest, most-nerve-wracking ten minutes of my life. I would suggest that those ten minutes of near hits and dented wood also constituted the longest, most nerve-wracking ten minutes of Dad's life too. But I nailed that bent 16 penny nail into that 2 by 4 and only hit Dad's thumb twice and the Williams family built a bathroom in what came to signify something each one of us would come to know:

Dad was a builder of men.

I see so much of him in how I interact with others, with how I feel about others.

His blueprints showed that you give tough love when you have to, but you always give second chances. Make them get to the point but allow them to put their head on your shoulder.

His lessons were clear:

Work hard, play hard.

Look people in the eye.

Treat people fairly.

Get up early, go to bed early.

Years later, Dad showed me the ultimate builder's respect. We were driving stakes on some land of his near Lampasas. He handed me a sledgehammer as he kneeled and held a stake. "Drive'er home son but don't you dare hit me." I had lots of experience with a sledgehammer over time but he didn't know that.

AND Under pressure, accuracy diminishes you know?

That was the longest five seconds of my life but you know what, it took only three swings to drive it home."

MY POINT IS THIS:

Dad rarely let me fail. I needed to fail so I could succeed. I remember those lessons every time I walk into my classroom. I don't want anyone **not** to be a builder of men.



Discipline in the Classroom Declines with Dynamic Instruction

I haven't worried about discipline from day one, seven years ago. It's not an issue. When you engage students, they don't misbehave. When they are part of the creation of their own learning, they don't misbehave. When they have real ownership, when they have rigor and relationships and relevance, they do not misbehave. They rise to the level you expect and exceed it. They do not want to disappoint me, their classmates, those who have detracted them all these years, their family and most of all, they do not want to disappoint themselves. Removing behavior as the main teacher focus clears the way for all of us to actually teach.

I'm not here to stop you from falling – I'm here to help you get back up

Find Your Story

We write a lot. Publish. Share. Re-write. We write novels and essays and plays and memoir and newspaper articles. We want to find our stories. We do it through dreams and passions and goals. And publishing. Creating.

I get 2 or 3 visitors a day. Ex students. They'll come back to show me a son or daughter, talk about their triumphs and failures, where they're going to school, ask for advice. I can tell that each one believes that they were my favorite student. That reminds me why I do my job, that I HAVE done my job.

And all too often they'll tell me that *you taught me* and I'll correct them, no it was *you who learned*.

To all of them I say:

Keep finding your story and keep looking for meaning. **Here my principal talks about behavior:**



Rigor, Relevance and Relationships, Educators Must Become Facilitators of Learning

I ask each student to: **Find your Story**

I let them know: **You have a beginning, a middle, now find your end --- in your work, your relationships, your life.**

Right-brained thinking is a priority in my classroom. I want them to find High concept which involves the capacity to detect patterns and opportunities, to create artistic and emotional beauty, to craft a satisfying narrative, and to combine seemingly unrelated ideas into something new.

I want them to find High touch. High touch involves the ability to empathize with others, to understand the subtleties of human interaction, to find joy in one's self and to elicit it in others, and to stretch beyond the mundane in pursuit of purpose and meaning.

To succeed after school, they don't need to learn to pass the TAKS. They need to learn beyond that. They need to learn to Design. Create a Story. Achieve Symphony. Locate Empathy. Learn to Play. Discover Meaning.

I have a 26-year old daughter who is an elementary school teacher. I prepared her for life after school – I disciplined her, loved her, prodded her, encouraged her. I cannot imagine not doing the same thing for each and every one of my students. Anything less is unacceptable.

I end with a way that I love to share with my students, a way for all of us to find empathy and discover our own stories, our own meanings: *I am friends with a NY Times best-selling author, Lee Gutkind. His first book took him seven years to research and write and during that time, he was embedded in a heart-transplant floor of a major hospital. The first transplant he covered was also the last –*

He went with the team to recover the heart of a 15-year old high school boy who died when he crashed his car into a tree. The parents were distraught. It shook Lee to his foundations, the pain and suffering. He met the 47-year old lady who received the boy's heart, given a chance on life.

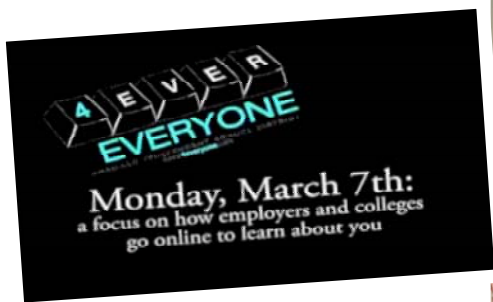
At the end of his seven years, the heart transplant ward through a party and many of those whose relatives gave up hearts and those who received them met up, an unusual event. The parents of the 15-year old boy showed up but stayed in the corner not mingling. The recipient of their son's heart smiled appreciatively and humbly as she greeted everyone. Lee studied the room. He had no ending to his book. He needed a wrap, something that would show the power of what the doctors and nurses do, that would emphasize the incredible strength of the families at both ends of the gift.

He asked the parents if they'd like to meet the woman who carried their son's heart. They refused. Too painful. Lee was crushed. That would have been the perfect ending.

He nursed a scotch at a table in the corner of the banquet room. And to his amazement, the ending unveiled right before his eyes. The parents hugged each other as they trudged reluctantly across the floor to the recipient-woman. Lee couldn't hear what they were saying to the woman but he knew what they were doing.

He got tears in his eyes when the mother leaned her ear to the chest of the woman and ... listened to her son's heart beating in the recipient's chest.

The perfect ending. Resolution and purpose. This is what we want for all of our students and children. To find their story, to make it have purpose. Thank you for your attention and your love of education.



Amy Becker Williams talks about rigor, relevance and relationships in Mark's room.



Letters of Recommendation

[Mike Bellah, Ph.D.](#)
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Amarillo College

[Susan L. Allen, M.Ed.](#)
ACP Director
West Texas A & M
University

[William Monroe, Ph.D.](#)
University of Houston
Honors College

2919 Mable
Canyon, Texas 79015

August 28, 2012

Lori Lamb (ADE) NAEA President
Brock Juror
420 North Main
Greenwood, AR 72936

Attention Brock Jurors:

As past president of a regional writers' group and creative writing teacher at a community college, I can tell you that Mark Williams is in high demand as a speaker, educator and consultant.

Already a multi-published author, on any given day Williams carries a dozen or more ideas in his head for books and articles on which he is working. And, as an educator, he transfers the same to students, helping even the most reticent ones discover thoughts they didn't know they possessed.

In addition, while many successful authors have the creativity to produce innovative, compelling plots, few have the same knack for marketing these ideas to agents and publishers. Not Mark Williams. Ask him about his potential stories, and he will tell you what audience they will attract, along with strategies for turning interest into sales.

But for this talented author, financial success doesn't end with selling books. Who but Mark Williams can arrange to get paid by a newspaper for trout fishing in his favorite Colorado streams, while, at the same time, being supplied with the best fishing and camping gear by eager sponsors. Then, later on, his newspaper pieces will lengthen into a book, which will lead to more royalties, more paid speaking engagements and more sponsors for more trips.

With all this success, it would be easy and understandable for Williams to lead the isolated, comfortable life of a successful author/entrepreneur, but Mark Williams gives back. Every school-year morning he rises early to once again pursue his greatest, if not lucrative passion—investing in high-risk students. For Williams' most successful characters are not the ones he creates on paper but in the classroom, students who will never be the same because they crossed paths with this talented and caring teacher.

Mark Williams is the kind of person we honor with awards like . . .

Sincerely,

Mike Bellah, Ph.D.
Professor of English
Amarillo College

August 28, 2012

Brock Prize Executive Committee
Brock International Prize in Education
2120 S. Lewis, Suite 415
Tulsa, OK 74104

Dear Distinguished Committee Members:

It is my privilege to support the nomination of Mark D. Williams for the Brock International Prize in Education. Mark came to our alternative teacher certification program in 2002 as a published author and journalist with a B.A. in English and history, some graduate work in English, and even a couple of years of law school under his belt. He completed the program and holds Texas teacher certification in Social Studies, Grades 4-8, and English Language Arts, Grades 8-12.

Mark's credentials, however, don't tell his story. Like many others in our non-traditional program, his career path did not lead him directly to teaching; however, teaching is Mark's calling. His wealth of life experience coupled with innate curiosity and natural creativity provide a winning combination for his students. Mark chooses to teach on an alternative campus whose students are often perceived as "difficult to serve," but he is not satisfied with just expecting his students to complete high school credits. He challenges, motivates, and inspires them to go beyond—to write articles, produce films, and develop smart-phone apps.

Mark made a deliberate, considered choice to be a teacher. Teaching wasn't his "default career" after trying and failing other things. Mark was and is successful in many areas, not the least of which—in fact, the greatest of which—is teaching. He doesn't do it for the money, summer vacation, recognition, or even the gratitude of his students. He does it because for him teaching isn't a job—it's a calling and a privilege.

Thank you for your consideration of Mark for this honor. You could not select a more deserving or dedicated educator to represent the ideals of this prestigious award. He is a committed, inspiring, and effective teacher who is in the trenches every day making a difference in the lives of young people.

Sincerely,

Susan L. Allen

Susan L. Allen, M.Ed., ACP Director

Discover the **BUFF** in You.™

Recommendation for

Mark Williams

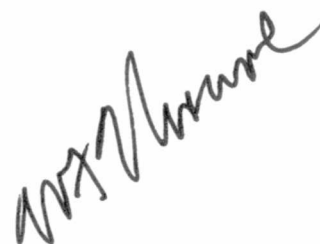
William Monroe, Ph.D.

O'Connor Abendshein Professor and Dean, The Honors College

Professor, Department of English

Founding Director, The Medicine & Society Program

Director, The Common Ground Teachers Institute



I write in very strong support of **Mark Williams**, who has rightly been nominated for the Brock International Prize in Education. I can say with absolute confidence that Mark is a generative force who is changing the way we understand and practice teaching and learning—locally, regionally, and throughout the world.

I have known Mark in several capacities, as an undergraduate student of mine and my late colleague Gerald McDaniel, as an author, and as a colleague and fellow educator. As an undergraduate at McMurry College in Abilene, Texas, Mark was simply a game-changer. A brilliant student of literature, a natural writer, a talented athlete, and a delightful companion—Mark was all of these and more. At a school with the requisite prestige and infrastructure, he would have been a slam-dunk nominee for a Rhodes Scholarship. Since our time together at McMurry, Mark and I have collaborated on several occasions, including an invited visit he made to the Honors College to meet with teachers as part of the Common Ground Teachers Institute and we worked together long into the night to draft a eulogy for Gerald McDaniel, our mutual friend who taught us both so much about teaching. With his boundless energy and genius for building connections, it is not surprising that, in recent years, the son has become the father, and I find myself looking to the example of Mark Williams for guidance and inspiration for the Honors College and the University of Houston.

Behind his achievements in education is Mark's pedagogical philosophy, and it is the implementation and application of his philosophy that has the potential to provide life-long benefits to all learners and to alter and enhance the scholastic community as a whole. Passionate and energetic, Mark radiates an attitude of we-can-do-this and has demonstrated the capacity to translate this from theory into practice. He believes in expanding vision and enlarging our perception as educators and leaders. His crossing of boundaries creates classrooms that are laboratories of opportunity that foster higher levels of learning and engagement. His approach is

YOU ARE THE PRIDE

both collaborative and technology-rich and transforms the classroom from a dull and rigid environment into an interactive and fluid community. Pushing limits and breaking boundaries, Mark introduces relevant, real-world projects into the classroom that join students, faculty, and the community in mutually-enhancing partnerships. With this model of learning, the natural curiosity of students is nurtured; when students become engaged and curious, they raise themselves to the next level of academic performance and, with the help of teachers and colleagues, prepare themselves for success in the world beyond the school.

Mark's initiative in developing the Amarillo 365 App, a student-created iTunes application promoting Amarillo tourism, demonstrates his innovative and imaginative thinking in the design of flexible curriculums with real-world applications. The Amarillo 365 also shows his dedication to his students, their education, and their involvement in the community. This inspired approach to blending knowledge, technology, leadership, and experience demands much of the students, both creatively and academically, but the results are well worth the time and energy. Mark encourages students to meet with local businesses, become connected to their community, and to take responsibility for their own educations through the project. His method transforms at-risk students into self-directed leaders. This pioneering program and teaching model comes at a critical time in the evolution of technology and global connectivity, reminding us, as educators, that all are at-risk when pedagogy does not keep pace with those it intends to serve.

In closing, I want to underscore my endorsement of a truly innovative and committed educator. Mark Williams has unbounded energy and tremendous intellectual capacity. He will continue to advance rigorous and collaborative methods that have a transformative impact on the theory and practice of education. Mark is a perfect fit for the Brock International Prize and would be a worthy recipient. If I can provide further information on this very special candidate, please do not hesitate to contact me at 713-743-9007 or wmonroe@uh.edu.