

# Orchestra director wins district teacher of the year

By Kiki Soto

Orchestra for Krissi Davis is more than just teaching students to be musicians.

"I make sure I am reaching out to the whole child — academic, social as well as their musical selves," said Davis, who was named Atlanta Public Schools' teacher of the year on Oct. 29 in a ceremony at the Delta Flight Museum. Davis received the district's "Excellence in Teaching" award and is in the running for Georgia's teacher of the year.

"I was in the audience wanting her to win so badly; it was like the Oscars. They had the envelope and seeing her up there made me so proud," Principal Dr. Betsy Bockman said. "When she won, I looked at her face, and she was so shocked. It is rare that a music teacher wins this award."

When Davis came to Grady three years ago, there were 64 members in the orchestra. Now, there are 110 members.

"I am really proud of adding the beginning orchestra," Davis said. "Even if you have never touched an instrument in high school, there is a place if you want to learn the violin, viola, cello, bass for the first time."

Davis, in her fourteenth year as a teacher, is well-deserving of the honor because she reaches students and drives them to excel, Dr. Bockman said.

"It means a lot to me professionally and personally that she won," Dr. Bockman said. "It is a well-deserved award because of the way she reaches out to kids. She manages to bring the best out of the students."

Dr. Bockman said she realized the music program at Grady needed to grow, thanks to Davis' enthusiasm.

"Her ability to think outside the box and trying new things has made me realize the music program needs to be broadened," Dr. Bockman said. "A new class coming next year could come as a Hip-Hop literature and culture class that Ms. Davis could co-teach with a literature teacher, previously done in New York."

In the orchestra room, students can often be found excitedly and energetically



ATLANTA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

**AND THE WINNER IS:** Orchestra teacher Krissi Davis (left) reacts to being named the winner of Atlanta Public School's "Excellence In Education" award on Oct. 29 at the Delta Flight Museum in Hapeville near Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport. The award honors the district's teacher of the year.

moving around, dancing to the melodies of the violins, violas and cellos under the instruction of Davis.

"Ms. Davis is a teacher that understands her students and has the ability to connect easily and understand all situations," said senior Remy Pair, an orchestra student. "She pushes her students because she knows everyone's potential and expects you to push yourself and have hope in yourself. She makes class fun and is loved by everybody and makes the class an overall great experience."

Davis is an APS graduate. She went through the Mays High School cluster, playing in the orchestra in elementary school and continuing orchestra throughout high school.

"The reason she got teacher of the year was because of her drive and innovation," said senior Jake Svedberg, an orchestra student. "She makes people move around the class and play in front of the class randomly to eliminate the reliance on the first stand of each section, and so far, three years in, there have been major improvements."

Prior to coming to Grady, Davis taught at Sutton Middle School and served as the lead middle school orchestra teacher for APS. Under her direction, the Sutton Middle School Sinfonia Orchestra performed in the National Band and Orchestra Festival in Carnegie Hall in the spring of 2016.

"She sets very high, yet achievable, goals," Svedberg said. "This year, she wants us to play Level 6 music, which is the highest for

high school, if I'm not mistaken, for LGPE (Large Group Performance Evaluation by the Georgia Music Educators Association). All that said, she is that one teacher who knows when to go hard and make the class play tons, and also she knows when to crack jokes and be more easy-going."

Davis is currently working toward a Ph.D. in music education at Georgia State.

"I love that she is a continual learner; that she is working on her Ph.D. and goes to conferences on her own time that makes her improve her skills," Dr. Bockman said. "She always wants to be better for the kids. The students bring out the best in her, and she brings out the best in them."

Orchestras under her direction consistently earned superior ratings and have performed in Washington, D.C., Orlando, FL, Symphony Hall in Chicago, IL, Carnegie Hall in New York, NY, and most recently in the 2018 ASTA (American Strings Teachers Association) National Orchestra Festival.

"Their performance at Carnegie got them into ASTA, so two really, really big back-to-back performances within the year," Davis said. "And just growing the orchestra has been my main focus since I have been here, just basically piggybacking off the foundation the previous director did."

Davis also recognized the need for social activities to keep students interested and involved in the orchestra program. Every August the orchestras at Grady and North Atlanta compete in a kickball tournament. Davis is also the sponsor of Grady's Gay-Straight Alliance club. During the pride parade on Oct. 13, she was there with GSA in the pouring rain as Dr. Bockman described, "just always doing the unexpected."

Davis said she couldn't explain why she won the award.

"I don't know because music is my thing. I stay in the music hall, but evidently, I guess people recognize the positive changes to the orchestra program," Davis said. "I mean, I am not really a flashy person, and I do not consider myself outgoing." □

# Loero engages, helps immigrants obtain citizenship

By YEI BIN ANDREWS

Every year, over one million immigrants come to the United States with hopeful eyes and packed bags in search of the American Dream. However, there is one major obstacle that can halt this ambition: citizenship.

When Spanish teacher Aquiles Loero came to America in 2010 from Venezuela, he knew he wanted to help out the Hispanic community. Later, when he got the opportunity to teach Citizenship and Naturalization classes at the Latin American Association, he jumped at the chance.

"I did not hesitate to learn more about the program and how to better help and serve the community with this important class," Loero said.

In these classes, Loero teaches immigrants from all walks of life about how to pass the United States Citizenship test, which is no easy feat.

According to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), an immigrant has to be a legal, permanent resident for five years before applying for citizenship. In addition to this, they must pass two tests: an English reading and writing test and a U.S. Civics test. In the classes, Loero teaches immigrants to study 100 questions based on U.S. government and history, but they will only be tested on 10 random questions.

"There's a lack of confidence, knowledge and information that prevents immigrants from becoming citizens," Loero said. "After the class, they feel more confident knowing that there is not anything wrong about being from a different place and that there's nothing wrong about desiring to become a U.S. citizen."

Giving immigrants confidence and a place of security is an important aspect of the citizenship classes for Loero. While helping immigrants learn American government and culture,

he also wants them to take a look at the bigger picture of their journey to obtain citizenship.

"The United States' history is full of beautiful and memorable stories like theirs; therefore, they need to understand that the path taken about going through the naturalization process is the right thing to do," Loero said.

Loero finds importance in the fact that everyone's background and experiences help shape the country that we know today, no matter what country you're from.

The Grady community consists of many immigrants, from countries, including Japan, Saint Lucia, the Netherlands, India and Mexico. Having students, staff and parents from all over the world shape Grady into the melting pot it is.

According to the Migration Policy Institute, 21 percent of school-age children in Georgia have a least one foreign-born parent. Junior Emma Uppelschoten's father immigrated to the United States from The Netherlands.

"I think my dad's immigration experience is definitely one of the less criminalized immigration experiences because he came from a European country," Uppelschoten said. "However, I know for people of color, the immigration experience can be really hard."

Uppelschoten wishes that more people understood that not all immigrants of color have bad intentions and are criminals.

Sophomore Bhuvan Saraswat came to America from India five years ago.

"I believe Grady does support immigrant students because, from my personal experience, people at Grady just talk to us normally," he says. "They do treat everybody equally."

However, Saraswat also recognizes the hardships and struggles that come with being an immigrant. Traveling internationally is harder for him and his family.

Citizenship is a significant topic to Loero. He believes



DANA RICHEL

**TEACHER BY DAY:** Aquiles Loero teaches Spanish classes at Grady, but outside of school hours, he goes to the Latin American Association to help immigrants through the complicated immigration process.

the path to citizenship is not easy, but it's important that immigrants try to attain it.

"Immigrants who look at the United States as their new home should become citizens. It is important that they can participate in democracy," Loero said. "It is important for the country that people who come to live here permanently see and feel the country as part of their lives, as their home."

Loero firmly believes in the saying "knowledge is power" and intends on educating and empowering immigrants.

"This class is what would help immigrants," Loero said. "This helps them to complete one last step of their immigration status and for some, their American dream fulfilled." □