

# Cooper soars into new role at First Flight

By Kat Gregg  
Staff Writer

**A** rocket scientist, a landscaper, a church administrative assistant, a teacher and a married mom. It might be difficult to imagine all these roles intersecting.

Until you meet Kathy Cooper.

Cooper is the newest addition to the FFHS science department this year, bringing with her a passion for teaching and a fascinating life story. In fact, her first “dream job” was fueled by a sibling rivalry.

“I have a brother who’s 15 months older than I am,” Cooper said. “He’s a math genius and he wanted to be a pilot. So I wanted to – of course – one-up him. I wanted to be a fighter pilot.”

Women were barred from entering military combat positions in the 1970s, but that did not stop Cooper from pursuing a career in aviation.

“I said, ‘Well if I can’t fly them, I’ll make them,’” Cooper explained. “So I went into aerospace engineering at Georgia Tech and that’s where the ‘rocket science’ comes from.”

When looking at job prospects after college, Cooper had two rules: stay east of the Mississippi River, and don’t work for the federal government. Her two job offers broke both rules: One job was based in Texas working on fighter planes and the other involved Tomahawk cruise missiles for General Dynamics in San Diego.

“It was completely opposite of what I said it was going to do,” Cooper said. “I went all the way to California to work for a federal government contractor.”

After having her second child, Cooper and her husband made the decision to move their family back East, where the rest of their relatives were.

After sending in applications to various companies, Cooper began working for the Defense Information Systems Agency. However, her time in that position was short-lived when the government signed a treated agreeing to stop using ground-launched cruise missiles. Cooper was then transferred to the Pentagon, where she worked as a black box data analyst for eight years.

Cooper was living the typical “American dream.” She owned a house, she had a young family, and a job she loved. But in 1991 during the Iraq War, Cooper had a realization.

“I sat there that night watching those rockets take off and blow up buildings, realizing there were people in those buildings that were getting killed because of what I did,” Cooper said. “I sat there and cried that night and realized, ‘My job is to kill people.’”

Cooper decided that she wanted to use her mind

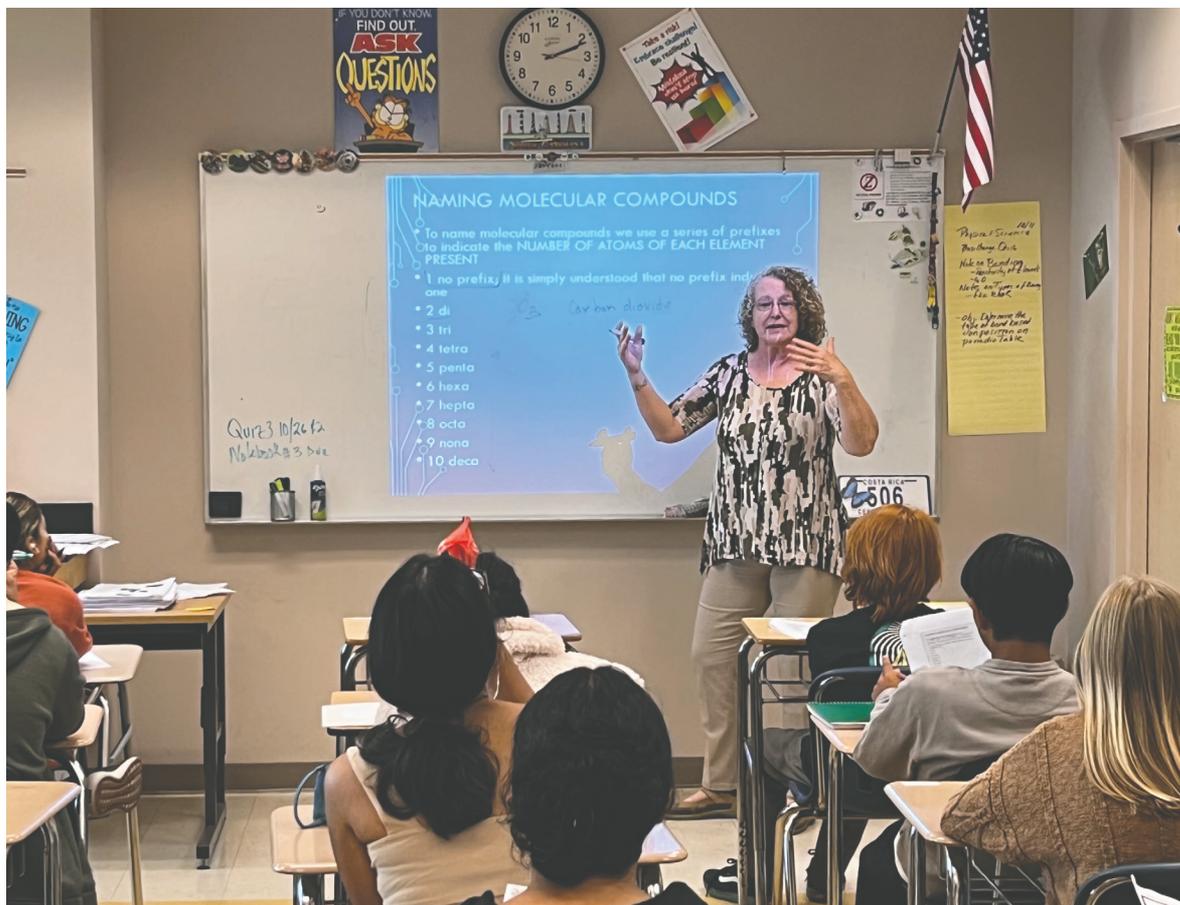


Photo by Allie Nigro/Nighthawk News

Science teacher Kathy Cooper goes through a lesson on molecular compounds in her Physical Science class. While new to FFHS, Cooper possesses plenty of experience in a wide-ranging professional career.

for a new creative venture.

“I’d been taking a course in landscape design on the side, just to keep my brain going,” Cooper said. “So, I opened my own landscaping business for two years and mostly did designs. I did the drawings, then I would sell the drawings to people and they would do their own landscape part.”

However, as her daughter was accepted to Elon University, Cooper recognized the need for a stable flow of income. As a result, Cooper became an administrative assistant at a church where a friend gave her some insight on her potential.

“A friend of mine said, ‘You know, you work great with the kids at the church and you love science: Have you ever thought about being a teacher?’”

She had not.

But the result of that conversation has been a 21-year teaching career along the East Coast.

“Fortunately, there was a brand new high school that my younger son was attending, and they needed

a one-period chemistry teacher,” Cooper said.

During the rest of the day, Cooper worked as a substitute teacher for the Exceptional Children’s program.

At the same time, her husband got laid off from his job and struggled to find something else in the Washington area. As a result, they had to widen their search. Cooper taught science at the The Early College at Guilford in the Greensboro area, but once their son graduated from school, she scoured the job listings for the Outer Banks.

“Every spring I would scroll through the Dare County listings to see (if there were any open positions),” Cooper said. “We love the beach and wanted to live out here. Some days (it is difficult), but I love teaching because I am building up the world instead of designing things that break it down or destroy it.”

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## Submitted Photos

From conducting fun experiments to celebrating accomplishments in challenging competitions over the years, Kathy Cooper has found her calling as a science teacher after working at a number of other jobs.

